The poetics of open and closed forms

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THE POETICS OF OPEN AND CLOSED FORMS

by

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate School of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

1992

MAJOR: ENGLISH (American Literature)

Approved by:

Advisor

Charles Bunting 2/23/92

date

Edward Higginbotham 3/21/92

5-25-92

Michael Knibbe 4-7-92
DEDICATION

I dedicate this essay to my mother, Callie Williams, and my father, Eddie Williams.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the Wayne State University English Department faculty and staff for their support over the years. Thanks also to the members of my dissertation committee: Charlie Baxter, for the sincerity of his guidance and vision at the helm of this ship; Dan Cottom, for his trenchant criticisms and humor; Michael Giordano, for his seminar in continental criticism and the generosity of his commentaries; and Eddie Hirsch, from whom I first got the idea for this essay, for cheerleading, good times (Detroit, Cincinnati and Chicago!) and the inspiration of his teaching and poetry. It goes without saying that these four gentlemen are responsible for most of what is good herein. I take responsibility for the errors, confusions and ambiguities that remain.

Special thanks to my friends scattered across this country, and to my family.
Preface

This essay originated in a thirty-page paper written for a course in contemporary poetry. I wrote that paper under the heady influence of phenomenology, semiotics and deconstruction; that such seriously serious strategies were applied to the poetry of Frank O'Hara is not as incredible as it may seem. The thesis of that paper was that open and closed forms of poetry are not identical to themselves: what is open is closed and what is closed is open. O'Hara's poetry appeared to discard all the traces of traditional closural features enumerated in Barbara Herrnstein-Smith's study Poetic Closure. I wanted to show otherwise.

At first I planned to do my thesis on O'Hara; all I had to do--so I thought--was gather a little more information on these notions of openness and closure. Four years later I knew I was in trouble, partly because it was four years later, but mostly because these concepts lured me into the spiraling abyss of philosophical dilemmas proven resilient to solution: form, space, time, etc. As I continued my research and meditated on the problems of openness and closure, the O'Hara essay was relegated to a mere chapter in the dissertation. That didn't seem ominous at the time; as my dissertation chair put it, much too optimistically, O'Hara was to be the happy ending to this story.

Needless to add, O'Hara has been dropped, and rather unceremoniously at that, from the essay. As I indicate in a note in the last chapter, O'Hara should have been the triumphant end of this essay because his work explodes the concepts of openness and closure by working parodically within the tradition, which is to say, at its edge. I won't repeat here all I say in that note; suffice it to say I regard the note as the preface to an essay I hope to write on O'Hara.

What is here is substantial even if I have only broached the problems of openness and closure. The essay has one major division: four chapters are devoted strictly to theories of openness, closure, form, the image, space, and time. The last two chapters are the
"application" of the thesis: There, I try to show how certain open forms of poetry are nonetheless closed in specific ways.

The first four chapters concern the critical definitions and conceptions of openness, closure, process, presence, form, space and time. Although the dissertation is traditionally conceived in empirical terms--statement of problem, experimentation or test, and then conclusion--I can pretend to no such thoroughness. At best I hope to have opened up a can of worms, not shut the lid on a Tupperware bowl. Thus I argue that the various ways critics have tackled these problems of poetic form have tended to obscure unsettled issues of space, time, process, etc.

Chapter One opens with an overview of the concepts of process and presence in the work of Walt Whitman and William Wordsworth. I posit these concepts as precursors of what later came to be called openness and closure. I chose these poets because I know their work relatively well. Others could have been substituted, for I believe these notions of process and presence can be found in a number of concepts beginning, at the very least, with the Greeks. But it would be difficult to deny the overwhelming and specific influence Wordsworth and Whitman both have had on the development of American poetry. This chapter concludes with a brief summary of the ramifications of process and presence in modernism and postmodernism.

Chapter Two implicitly opposes Charles Olson's "Projective Verse" essay to Barbara Herrnstein-Smith's Poetic Closure. I show how projective verse is a limited form of open poetry, and then demonstrate the problems Herrnstein-Smith encounters when she formalizes rhetorical and phenomenological effects of closure. David Hult's introduction to Concepts of Closure and Umberto Eco's The Role of the Reader serve as bridges from Olson to Herrnstein-Smith.

Chapter Three is devoted entirely to spatial form theory. I examine Joseph Frank's influential essay on spatial form and then examine a recent homage to him published as an anthology of essays on his work. In this chapter I connect Frank's model of spatial
form to New Criticism and show how the influence of twentieth century painting on modern poetry--an influence which is irrefutable--was taken by Frank and the New Critics for the determination of modern poetry. I show how all this is related to a misconception of painting as "frozen" pictures and literature as the "movement" of ideas. Thus the question of form and the question of the image is taken up in the last part of the chapter in the work of W. J. T. Mitchell. Since these misconceptions rest on misunderstandings of space and time, chapter four covers the temporal-based hermeneutics of William V. Spanos, a few of Jacques Derrida's readings of spatial/temporal concepts, and finally, a consideration of the nature of space and time in the physical and biological sciences. Each of these areas could have been a chapter--at least--by itself. I hope, however, I have given some indication where future studies on these problems might go.

So ends the "theory." Chapters Five and Six are devoted, respectively, to the talk poems of David Antin and language writing. I explore the significant breach with traditional poetry that Antin's work makes, but I also focus on the ways his work is still "poetry." In short, I examine its closural features and limits by reading several poems from his two collections, Talking at the Boundaries and Tuning. The last chapter explores the language writing movement by examining its premises and methods and then, as a sort of coda to it all, reading a language poem, which is to say, attempting to read in the "new ways" prescribed by theorists of language poetry. Although I cover a number of figures briefly in the opening section of this chapter, at least a third of the chapter is devoted to the theory and practice embodied in the work of Barrett Watten.

We may be living in the age of post-structuralism and de-centeredness, but the dissertation is a faithful servant to tradition. I think, in what follows, the center still holds, and holds it all together: all poems are opened and closed; they differ, however, in how they are open and how they are closed.
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CHAPTER ONE

And whatever else the poets in this volume may or may not have in common, all demonstrably are seeking a new or re-newed world.¹

For many postmodernist poets, discontinuity from an intimidating English tradition required not simply an American tradition, a dynastic New World poetic, but an anti-tradition, that is, diversified theories of instability and change that might be termed poetics of process: poetics which generate both new forms of expression and their own antitheses, antitheses generated within the "bodies" of their hosts and containing within themselves their own antithetical guests.

These poetics of process can be traced back to one of their foremost American proponents--Walt Whitman. These poetics embrace the spirit of the road, the self-inflating fiction of moving outside the borders of culture and Culture. If this American myth—adventure as an absolute break with the past in all its cultural and social forms—can be demystified by a consideration of Wordsworthian revisionism, I must nevertheless make a careful distinction between it and the revisionism of a Whitman. The Wordsworthian poetic of process manifests itself in the working out of relationships between parts and wholes, between spots of time and the immortality intimated by those epiphanic moments. Implicit in the possibility of a relationship between parts and wholes is the presumption of a difference—possibly irreducible—between them. Yet the possibility of a relationship between parts and wholes also implies the possibility of an organic relationship between the two. Insofar as parts and wholes refer to separate categories—respectively, experience and transcendentalism—the myriad of concepts which might be placed in these categories—art and nature, humanity and divinity, adulthood and childhood, etc.—are always conceived in terms of a dialectical hierarchy.

But insofar as parts and wholes are subsumed under the category of transcendentalism itself, those same concepts are conceived in terms of an idealized continuum. I define postmodernist poetics as poetics of process much later in this
chapter and so use the term postmodernist to refer to the more radically experimental of
the poets that follow Eliot Pound, Stevens, etc: Olson, Williams Koch, O'Hara, Spicer,
etc.2

So for Wordsworth process itself is the continuity of intimation arching over the
discontinuity implied by epistemological limits. What we "intuit" is the connection
between, for example, the past and future, so the process of movement from one to the
other implies not a break, a disconnection, but instead a more or less smooth transition,
that more or less indicating the extent to which what we "know" tells us differently (i.e.,
disconnection). But this continuity that also intimates the whole of immortality and
eternity is always undermined by the apparent plenitude of those "spots of time." For
example, in "Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth deploys these "parts" to intimate the whole,
but his rapturous delineation of these parts intimate their self-sufficiency: "In this
moment there is life and food / For future years." Continuity, then, is not a straight
line, but a spiral in which one's movements through the "moments" of an inner arc
serves as a ritualistic prefiguration and repetition of both the "moments" one has
already encountered and the "moments" one will encounter in successive cycles through
outer arcs. Intimation thus proceeds by both regression and progression, memory and
anticipation, until the outermost arc--immortality--is reached. But the "gaps"
between the arcs, the actual differences of each moment remembered, experienced and
anticipated, insures Wordsworth's philosophical and poetic schema--origin and
tendency as co-relative--from the delusion of Hegel's circle of absolute knowledge.3

How, then, does continuity overcome apparently irreducible differences?
Wordsworth constructs a myth in which nature suppresses the early childhood memory
of pre-existence, what Wordsworth calls "Abundant recompence" for the loss of this
memory is the philosophical mind which raises the memory from the Abyss in the
transfigured form of the imagination in the Alps episode of The Prelude. Immortality is
intimated as about to be recovered.
The Wordsworthian pre-existence has its correlatives in Pope's Golden Age of classical learning and Milton's prelapsarian Eden. These paradises function as ideal norms from which the poets take their various stances toward the world of men and women only because their norms are paradisiacal: wholes and absolutes existing outside time. They are wholes that are both anterior and posterior to their parts: depending on the particular poet, postlapsarian, post-Graeco-Roman, and post-partum. For these poets, strategies of continuity can be achieved only at the level of transcendental idealism.4

Wordsworth differs, however, from Pope and Milton in that he believes it is possible to reconstruct a memory of "how" the soul once felt. Since, for him, memory is only the trace of a thought which is itself only the representative of a feeling,5 Wordsworth postulates that the paradise to be regained can be intimated by nurturing—and permitting nature to nurture—a feeling of a feeling, a part of a part, which can never be experienced as a whole. Indeed, Wordsworth warns against imagining any part as the whole:

Who knows the individual hour in which
His habits were first sown as a seed,
Who that shall point as with a wand, and say
"This portion of the river of my mind
Came from yon fountain?6

For Wordsworth the processes of art mirror the processes of nature, and so one does "reason to dissect" when one allows any spot of time to become an end in itself, when one transforms a part into a fetish as though it was the whole itself—such is the risk of these epiphantic spots of time.

But could Wordsworth have in fact remembered "what" he felt? Whatness is the epiphany of wholeness, allness, what by definition cannot be known. But it is wholeness partitioned, allness delimited, unknownness known; what the actual epiphantic moment
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But could Wordsworth have in fact remembered “what” he felt? Whatness is the epiphany of wholeness, aliness, what by definition cannot be known. But it is wholeness partitioned, aliness delimited, unknownness known; what the actual epiphantic moment
seems to consist of is an observer witnessing a whole converted into a part. Thus the observer, only a part, intimates his wholeness once possessed before his fall into partness, mortality at the moment of conception.

How, then, can the observer not intimate the partness of what was once thought to be whole? How can he evade despair when he realizes that the epiphantic moment--now seen as a part converting into a part--does not intimate an immortality about to be recovered but instead serves as a painful reminder of what he has never had? Wordsworth's response is the suppression of history under the guise of continuity, the conversion of memory into an imagination that bridges parts and wholes.

Now, immediacy is a prerequisite for epiphany, even an epiphany of parts. Mediation dilutes whatness into howness, and as the latter term suggests, the catalyst is figuration which represents what is supposed to have already been present. For example, even though a thought is only a feeling of a feeling, that thought is nonetheless a form of mediation. The philosophical mind may indeed provide "Abundant recompense" for the loss of the memory of pre-existence, but is this sufficient "recompense?" For howness, as a trope mapped onto whatness, cannot "fit." Because it too is only a part, language, for Wordsworth, is inadequate to describe the whole of reality because that whole exceeds the descriptive powers of language. But, simultaneously, this whole of reality is, at the moment it is conceptualized as reality, in fact, yet another part. The fields of language and reality reverse relations, and now--as well as before--language exceeds the boundaries of reality; its field encompasses reality. The difference between the two, the space of the imagination, remains, but now--as well as before--the domain of the unknown, the whole, has been superseded by the zone of discourse.

But if I accept the reversibility of the fields, I must answer this question: since reality can be enclosed within language, why is there still "something to pursue," "something evermore about to be"? Wordsworth provides a clue: these lines occur within the context of discussion of the activity of the mind. I can circumvent the
apparent cul-de-sac by shifting the mode of discourse from the ontological to the epistemological plane. And with this maneuver, howness envelopes whatness, figure buries figured. The Wordsworthian mind, unfolding to nature, reverses itself and enfolds upon itself, bending in search of its own reflection just as Narcissus bent toward the pool. But unlike that youth doomed to pine in stasis, Wordsworth's mind, having seen not its own but Dorothy's reflection, plunges into the protean image and resurfaces as the drowned man, the Arabian solider, the guide in the Alps, the hermit whose hermitage is violated by communion with the reader (not with the poet who has already gone on to another "spot," another text, another image). The reader is too another part, bent toward the text, and seeing not his own but Wordsworth's reflection, falls, displacing the Wordsworthian ego (or, rather, filling in the void the ego momentarily occupied), thus affirming its partness even as it seeks to defer apartness by inhabiting a succession of parts.

* * *

In Whitman's work poetic process takes the form less of a developmental system than of an additive model. The additive principle is evident at every level of Whitman's work: the ever-expanding editions of Leaves of Grass, the branching stanza forms, the sweeping lines. The dominant motif of Whitman's work seems to urge gathering, collecting, holding.

In Whitman we witness the foremost representative of the unabashed bravado of a young nation whose somewhat ignoble origins (religious refugees whose development of a successful agrarian industry was founded on the systematization of slavery and displacement of the indigenous people) did not diminish the heady dream of an unprecedented democratic future. Spurred onward by the individualism of the religion which had made them suspect heretics in Anglican England, the new Americans found themselves in a bountiful land where (white) men might be free to pursue private interests. As the subsequent repulsion of the British, the conquest of the natives, and
the subjugation of Africans seem to demonstrate, the perseverance and shrewdness of the Americans seemed limitless. The average American saw himself as an active and energetic individual, and he saw his country through the starry eyes of possibility and optimism. This optimism, however delusory, rested on capitalist expansionism, the economic analogue to the additive principle.7

It would be both tempting and conventional to partition the first two centuries of American history into roughly two halves. There would supposedly be the first century of national history during which American generally lauded individual enterprise, the abundance of the land, and the economic self-sufficiency of the average man. In roughly the second century of American history these notions would undergo mutation: individual enterprise collapses into group-think monopolization, the abundance of land justifies topsoil ruination and excessive exploitation of underground natural resources, and economic self-sufficiency conspires with transplanted European wealth to form an indigenous plutocracy. In short, America is transformed from a basically agrarian society, with economic and political power widely diffused among farmers, artisans and small businessmen, into a predominantly industrial force, with economic and political power concentrated in an entrepreneurial and capitalist class. Opportunity in this century would no longer mean the right to be a man in a society of equals, independent because they are financially self-sufficient; it would mean the chance to get rich by exploiting the physical resources of the country as well as the labor of other men. America's destiny would no longer be God's commonwealth, as the Puritans imagined, nor would it be a republic wherein ordinary men could rise to their full and equal worth, as Paine and Jefferson supposed. America in this century foresees herself as an economic power ruled by the royalty of industry.8

This division of American history roughly replicates antebellum and postbellum America because the Civil War gave impetus to the growth of industrial capital. The victory of the Union forces established the unarguable dominance of the modern
industrial North over the archaic agrarian system of the South. Industrialization of the
nation was aided on two fronts: the influx of immigrants from eastern and southern
Europe into the cities where they constituted de facto cheap labor pools, and the
appropriation of the Republican Party—the dominant political instrument of the North—
by industrial giants to further their own economic interests. It is not mere coincidence
that so many American novelists of the late nineteenth century wrote books that dealt
with the unforeseen ramifications of unchecked financial greed and the subsequent effects
on American character and civilization. These books dealt with getting and spending,
with Western wealth and Eastern culture, with millionaires and labor agitators, with
the Gospel of Christ and Andrew Carnegie's Gospel of Wealth, with Social Darwinism and
Socialism, with the social climbing of the new rich and the snobbishness of the old rich,
with Europe's poor people seeking wealth in America and with rich Americans buying
civilization in Europe. A cursory sampling of the œuvres of Twain (Innocents Abroad,
The Gilded Age), Howells (A Chance Acquaintance, The Rise of Silas Lapham, A Hazard of
New Fortunes) and James (Portrait of a Lady, The Bostonians, The Ambassadors)
suggests the urgency of concern felt by American writers at that time.9

All that I have summarized thus far is true—except, perhaps, for the partitioning
itself, the division of American and cultural concerns into antebellum and postbellum
periods. The democratic aspirations of most Americans, it is claimed, mutated or
degenerated. The application of these terms to the changes that occurred presupposes a
certain value system; the implication is that something was right in the first place. The
American Dream might have been realized. But the uncritical acceptance of terms like
mutation or degeneration drags us back into the thought of the nineteenth century
moralists—not only Twain, Howells and James, but also Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman—
—who sketched in pen the stern consequences of a people that attempted to compensate for
their sense of cultural inferiority with the neurotic accumulation of wealth. Is there not
in Whitman's all-too-friendly embrace both an unbridled joy and a certain desperation?
Is there not a rather heavy-handed moralism behind his exhortations to dam the shores against--and exorcize residual--Europeanism? Is there not in Whitman's attempt to forge a new world unfettered by its moorings a forgetting of history--what Nietzsche foresaw as a prerequisite for the appearance of the Over-man? A break with history, as Marx sometimes, contradictorily, thought? Isn't this why Whitman can say that his poems will be about "the young men of the States" because "they out-rival the best of the rest of the earth"? Isn't this national chauvinism our heritage?

In Whitman's democratic embrace there is a contrary movement, a pushing away of European habits, thoughts, values, behavior, etc. The irony here is that American democracy has its roots in the European experience of democracy. However minor a role it may have played in their decision to leave Europe, religious freedom under democratic governance sprouted in the Old World. The principle Whitman believed peculiarly American could never have developed had it not first been conceived "over there."

What if the advent of an American plutocracy was the logical consequence--and not a perversion or degeneration--of nascent capitalism (i.e. agrarianism)? To answer "yes" too quickly affirms the letter--if not the spirit--of the Marxist law. In that spirit then: was it only idealism that prevented the early Americans from seeing that the economic policies being allowed to shape themselves in accord with the valorized "free market" conflicted with the political ideal of democracy? Or was it that those espousing democratic ideals and those getting rich already belonged to different classes? Or was there a link between plutocracy and democracy? To add a third factor to the equation: what is the relationship between Calvinism and democracy? All this confusion results in part from the abuses the word "democr-.cy" has suffered, for though it literally means rule of all people, it is usually taken to mean individual liberty. America was founded on both individualism and democracy; there was no perversion in our natural history. As the nation's industrial base expanded and its political machinery became more complex the contradictions between the beliefs became more apparent because more--politically
and economically—was at stake. Perhaps this contradiction goes largely unnoticed because in this country democracy and plutocracy contest one another largely within a predominant ethnic and racial and gender elite—Anglo-Saxon males.

Thus if in 1776 it was believed that all "good or 'virtuous' men would subordinate personal considerations to the good of their communities—to the commonweal or res publica—which was a more proper object of their thought and efforts," does not any individualism—even religious—stand as an obstacle to this democratic goal? Even if one assumes that the individual is intrinsically related to the general society, this has never meant that the individual's individualism is intrinsically related to the general society. The individual's individualism is only permissible when, in fact, it conforms to the tacit or explicit guidelines of the society's notions of individualism. The early proponents of democracy took their task most seriously:

It was . . . characteristic of the time that Charles Thomson, the Philadelphia patriot, scrupulously removed the names of Pennsylvania revolutionaries from David Ramsay's manuscript history of the Revolution. To emphasize who did what, it seemed, was to detract attention from their common public mission. Nor must we gloss over distinctions between the early radical revolutionaries and the democratic liberalism of the later so-called Founding Fathers. Thus, the Revolution was subtly transformed into the war for Independence (as it remains for many), a more subtle rallying point than the fundamental reformation that revolution implies. Persons whose importance was confined to the period before 1776—who rallied colonists against established authority—were forgotten or, where their prominence precluded obfuscation, mythologized over time into symbols of all that had to be rejected in the revolutionary heritage.

If we still wish to speak of a partition in American history in terms of a revolutionary ideal subsumed under plutocratic and democratic hierarchies, perhaps a more valid
historical line could be drawn between the "old Revolutionaries" and the Founding Fathers, the proponents of revolution and the proponents of independence.15

If the democratic ideal entails the limitation of individual desire, perhaps Whitman's statements concerning his poetry's relationship to American democracy should be read as thoroughly consistent and appropriate. Perhaps the often unabashed arrogance--I am tempted to say bullying--that marks Whitman's prose and poetry ought to be read as part and parcel of the democratic ideal. The true opponent to democracy would then not be communism but antinomianism, the valorization of the individual conscience.

What is radical in Whitman's work is his embrace of matter and the body without disgust or peevish moralizing: "In poems or in speeches I say the word or two that has got to be said, adhere to the body, step with the countless common footsteps, and remind every man or woman of something."16 For Whitman the body is not only a point of departure but also its own destination, for, like nature itself "inexorable, onward, resistless, impassive amid the threats and screams of disputants, so America."17 This conflation of nature and culture is Social Darwinism: the supposed evolution and expansion of nature justifies the corresponding evolution and expansion of culture. But the opposite equation is at least as plausible: that the expansion and evolution of culture gives rise to the story of nature as evolution and expansion. Whitman's suppression of this possibility is one with his rejection of Europeanism since the second formulation not only elevates culture over nature, but also implies that nature is merely a story told by culture. Because Whitman holds fast to the body as the one site of the natural within culture, it becomes for him the intersection of the individual and community: "I ate with you and slept with you, your body has become not yours only nor left my body mine only."18 And it is this possibility of intersection that justifies the dream of wholeness and completion:

Of course, all literature, in all nations and years, will share marked attributes in common, as we all, of all ages, share the common human attributes. America
is to be kept coarse and broad. What is to be done is to withdraw from predecessors, and be directed to men and women—also The States in their federalness, for the union of the parts of the body is not more necessary to their life than the union of These States is to their life.¹⁹

But since we know that the body can function without certain parts, and that some parts can function temporarily outside the body, the totality envisioned here is more desirable than necessary. This dialectic between the parts and the whole, between the individual and community, is hierarchical: not for nothing is the union of the states associated with their life. Whitman's belief in the possibility of wholeness stems from his assumption of "common human attributes," which is the problem of "human nature." Which ever science proffers its definition of the "human," it never evades a moral imperative: consider, for example, the anthropological term Homo Sapien. The determination of the human is cultural, political, biological, etc.

I read Whitman's desire to sing both "the simple separate person" and "Yet utter the word Democracy, the word En-Masse" as paradox and not contradiction only at the level of rhetoric. But at the levels of political, economic and social life the "simple separate person" is predetermined and oriented in advance by the "En-Masse." And it is this "En-Masse" as a whole body that Whitman values over the "simple separate person":

In every department of These States, he who travels with a coterie, or with selected persons, or with imitators, or with infidels, or with the owners of slaves, or with that which is ashamed of the body of a man, or with that which is ashamed of the body of a woman, or with anything personal less than the bravest and the openest, travels straight for the slopes of dissolution. The genius of all foreign literature is clipped and cut small, compared to our genius, and is essentially insulting to our usages, and the organic compacts of The States.²⁰

The additive principle is both democratic and hierarchical, and fueled by the birth-pangs of capitalism, parallels the interrelated conceptualization of "Yankee ingenuity"--
inquirer and inventor—and the "Ugly American"—imperialist and bully.

* * *

The American poetry of the greater part of the twentieth century may seek to be new or to re-new, but as I have tried to suggest via the exemplary claims of Whitman, this is a poetry that seeks to be new and re-new. Be new/Re-new.21 This rhyme scheme echoes the adventure and dilemma of a poetry that looks backward as well as forward, a technique I've tried to show has affinities with Wordsworthian revisionism. For Wordsworth, looking back deadens the impact of looking ahead: he is going to die. But though that death will not herald a strict return--immortality is not equivalent to pre-existence--Wordsworth finds comfort nonetheless. Still, as embarrassment and hesitation and uncertainty undermine Wordsworth's stoic faith in redemption bequeathed to Dorothy in "Tintern Abbey," because the gaps between the arcs of human history remain, so the Titanic heralding of the new by this century's American poets betrays anxiety about the lack of a New World tradition. Thus the new is, more often than not, consciously or unconsciously, couched in terms and formats that have only been renewed.

In 1972 Warren Tallman was perhaps too easily convinced that the new poets were doing what they said they were doing:

Yeats is a magnificent poet but is perhaps nearer to some endpoint of a great British line than to the emergence of a new American poetry. And however ambiguously Eliot looms up in our century he has seemed to most of the writers in this book to be casting back rather than moving forward, more urbane than urgent.22

The implicit distinction between the modernism of Eliot and that of Williams, which supposedly "leads" to postmodernism, can only be retained if one pays more attention to what the poets said they were doing than to what they actually did. One difference between the modernist poetics that stemmed from Eliot and those that followed from Williams might be that while all the postmodernist poets looked backward and forward,
they looked at different places, different times.23

The renewal of history by postmodernist poets like Olson and Snyder might seem to justify the point for these postmodernists, but can the same be so easily said of the Ginsbergs, O'Haras and Ashberys? In what sense and to what extent do their statements—in prose and poetry—look back? Certainly one might single out poems by any of the latter that explicitly draw upon tradition and history, but the general tendency of these poets seems to be forward. To this extent, these three are among the most experimental of the postmodern American poets. For example, both Ginsberg and O'Hara deploy the rhetorical power of the long line which supports both the Whitmanesque inclusiveness of Ginsberg and the I-do-this-I-do-that strategy of O'Hara.

Earlier I said that American poets always keep a nervous eye on the past; the suppression of our European heritage is achieved at the cost of anxiety, exaggeration, embarrassment and hysteria. In my discussion of his processive poetic, I have tried to show how true this was for Whitman. For Ginsberg, as for Whitman, one facet of the new is the valorization of the body and the material. What is new is what is—"clothes" in which to fit the material body are superfluous:

Mind is shapely. Art is shapely. Meaning Mind practiced in spontaneity invents forms in its own image & gets to Last Thoughts. Loose ghosts wailing for body try to invade the bodies of men. I hear ghostly Academics in Limbo screeching about form.24

Not surprisingly this emphasis on the is-ness of body is bound to orality and speech:

Ideally each line of Howl is a simple breath unit . . . I realized at the time that Whitman's form had rarely been further explored . . . No attempt's been made to use it in the light of early XX Century organization of new speech-rhythm prosody to build up large organic structures.25

For Ginsberg, speech and breath units give the poet access to the new because these oral units captured on the page represent thought unfettered by the conventions of imposed
forms. This is why

The only pattern of value or interest in poetry is the solitary, individual pattern peculiar to the poet's moment & the poem discovered in the mind & in the process of writing it out on the page, as notes, transcription reproduced in the fittest accurate form, at the time of composition ("Time is the essence" says Kerouac).26

O'Hara's flippant gloss is this is:

As for measure and other technical apparatus, that's just common sense. If you're going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you. There's nothing metaphysical about it.27

As this statement suggests, O'Hara is among the least mystical of the postmodernists. He is among those least likely to be found looking backward, least likely to be concerned with a renewed writing. But O'Hara's fidelity to the new is "only" formal, and in those terms, fairly late in his career. Thematically he looks backward, perhaps as much as Ginsberg and Whitman combined (Olson's Maximus is the epitome of the looking backward/looking forward poem).

* * *

As both Wordsworthian revisionism at the ontological ("something evermore about to be") and epistemological ("something to pursue") planes of experience and Whitmanian expansionism ("Master, we have not come through centuries, castes, heroisms, fables, to halt in this land today. Or I think it is to collect a tenfold impetus that any halt is made."), process encompasses the dialectic of looking backward and looking forward.)28

This dialectic might at first appear Hegelian inasmuch as it leads to a synthesis of correlating principles--origin and tendency for Wordsworth, the individual and community for Whitman--into transcendental ideals: the Philosophical Mind for Wordsworth, the Great Experiment (America) for Whitman. But because these are always ideals to pursue as well as ideals always about to be the synthesis into the circle
of absolute knowledge not only never occurs--one could argue it never occurs in Hegel's work either--but it also is never posited as having occurred. Whitman's and Wordsworth's works are celebrations of the creative power of the individual ego engaging its creative ground (nature for Wordsworth, society for Whitman). These celebrations occur at the planes of experience which, however infinite their areas, are always circumscribed by the spheres of hermeneutics. Such at least is the premise of hermeneutics: manifest experience (e.g., poems) is always subject to the science of interpretation. But interpretation is not comprehension; thus, no single circle of interpretative strategy can fully illuminate a poem. Rather a plurality of circles--a sphere--becomes the guardian of all that a poem means. That individual interpretations--or circles--may contradict one another is permissible so long as they implicitly or explicitly "demonstrate" the scientificity of their methodologies. Thus these spheres of interpretation form traditions which are fortified by institutions. If we agree that a poem is, to a certain extent, an interpretation of a precursor poem, then it is possible to speak of a body of poetry by different poets as constituting a "sphere" of interpretation.

"Modernism" would then be the name of a set of formal interpretative procedures for not only understanding its historical moment but also for understanding other interpretations--that is other poems--of historical moments. The term modernism refers to a body of work that is both bounded by history--for example the poetry of Eliot, Stevens and Pound--and unbounded--for example all works before and after them that reflect the formal concerns of those three poets. The naming of these methods as modernist occurs because of what went on in the first part of this century, but the name itself refers to the resulting realignment of literary history. Once this naming becomes institutionalized, literary reputations rise and fall according to the latest name.

Now it is the susceptibility of poetry to this kind of consensus-building that the proponents of poetics of process sought to avoid. It is this legacy I define as postmodernist. By process I mean not just the anti-teleological drive of particular
poems but also the dizzying proliferation of poetics themselves: Objectism, Objectivism, Deep Image, Confessionalism, etc. It might be argued that the notion of process common to so many poetics constitutes the sort of clustering effect the postmodernists set themselves against. But it should be noted that the poetics of process actually call into question all authoritative ideas—including the poetics of process. Thus the self-questioning of their own authority affirms that very authority since to dispose of the poetics of process entails proceeding from them to something else. To the extent that it refers to the coming and going of different poetics, postmodernism as I've defined it is itself a renaming—and thus a recasting—of literary history.

This schema of the poetics of process becomes problematic if we examine the conditions that contributed to their constitution. One of these is the anxiety of canonization. Academic canon formation derives its empirical priority from a long European literary tradition which derives its spiritual authority from its apotheosis of Graeco-Roman culture.29 By deifying history and tradition modernism deified canonization. Thus the politics of settling scores, rearguarding, and kneejerk reactions, a process that turns writers, dead or alive, into debutantes and whores, decorated heroes and cannon fodder, is magically elevated into a grave debate between truth and falsehood, good and evil. It was just their aversion to such a telos that led the postmodernists to exult in aleatory composition. But the postmodernists also recognized that the concept of invention (which subsumes telic and aleatory composition) had always belonged to convention. On the one hand it was invention that sustained the growth of the canon; invention was the amorphous web upon which the ideoarch of canonization staked out its territory. On the other hand, to embrace the canon in a fitful struggle of passion was to risk consumption by an intimidating history after one was spent. It was this familial kiss of death that these poetics of process sought to endlessly forestall; it was these poetics or process that kept one one step ahead of that diaphonous net.30

The anarchistic impulses of postmodernism not only found their expression in their
common aversion to a monumentalized modernism, but they also justified this aversion by appropriating concepts from the sciences. Thus the principles of uncertainty and undecideability from, respectively, quantum physics and mathematics, seemed to value process over product. Subsuming these principles under the rubric of process, the postmodernists seemed unconcerned about the implications these principles meant for the sciences: namely that these ideas undermined the very "objectivity" that drew the postmodernists to the sciences. But just as these poetics of process affirm their authority at the moment it is usurped, so these scientific principles demonstrated the authority of the sciences to the postmodernists. The sciences were still marching toward the "truth." By analogizing their projects to those of the sciences, the postmodernists implicitly labelled themselves "belated" and thus reaffirmed the conventional hierarchy that values science over art in matters of the "truth" of the "real world."

But science after uncertainty and undecideability cannot be said to be more firmly entrenched as the standard bearer of truth. These radical principles suggest instead that the notion of ontology--the "truth" of which the sciences seek--is itself only an effect or force generated by epistemology. Ontology is then a construct of epistemology. These principles thus radically challenge "essence" and "positivism" as anything other than heuristic concepts. There would seem to be no reason to regard the sciences as closer to the truth than the arts. But the theorists of poetic process did just that.

This "misreading" of Heisenberg's and Goedel's insights has its source in a contrary movement, or stabilizing element, within these poetics of process: the plentitude of presence. The monumentalism of modernism is directly related to its vertical view of history; the further one recedes from the present the greater the epoch. But one only goes back so far. For Eliot the "base" of this triangle is pre-Romantic; for Pound, Graeco-Roman (the language poets are pre-postmodern or proto-modern). Contemporary objects and experiences take on significance only by virtue of their relationship to past objects and experiences. Because they interconnect what is present
with what is absent symbol and metaphor—as opposed to allegory and metonym—
dominate the modernist monument. True to his stated intentions, one rarely finds
personalities in Eliot's poems; one finds instead archetypes. The anti-monumentalism of
postmodernism is directly related to its horizontal view of human experiences; history
was recast as histories. Value and significance inhere in objects and experiences
themselves. Local color, characters drawn from "real life," the vagaries of temporal
experience, etc., dominate the poetry of Williams, O'Hara, Koch, and Moore.

The postmodernists imagined themselves as having awakened from the nightmare of
history. Under the formal dicta of strategies of process, these poets sought to survey a
field of present objects of experiences and relate these to the reader exactly as seen or
imagined by the writer. But this on-going process of scanning puts into question the
plentitude of presence. The procedure of process suggests that an object's or experience's
plentitude is never plenty—thus another object, another experience. It is true that
process arrests transcendence (no thing is "shot" long enough to tempt reverence) and
trans-descendence (relatively little metaphor, psychologism, history), but it also
aborts the plentitude of presence.

Poetics of process cannot be reconciled with poetics of presence. For one thing,
process tends to deflect attention from the objects or events to the presentation of the
poem itself; style supervenes substance. For another, poetics of process suggest
openness, formally and thematically. But poetics of presence de-emphasize history and
eschatology; thus, poetics of closure. Postmodernism opens up poetry when it shifts the
unit of rhythm from the foot to the syllable, when it posits form as the extension and
fulfillment of content, when it uses everyday diction and subject-matter, when it values
process over product. But postmodernism closes poetry when it elides tropes, when
disclosure displaces reflection and prophecy, when the plenitude of presence arrests the
inertia of process. Postmodernism is not more open than modernism; both are closed and
open in different ways.
NOTES


2 I define postmodernist poetics as poetics of process much later in this chapter and so use the term postmodernist to refer to the more radically experimental of the poets that follow Eliot Pound, Stevens, etc: Olson, Williams Koch, O'Hara, Spicer, etc. See also en passim Robert Onopa, "The End of Art as a Spiritual Project," Triquarterly, 26 (1973): 363-82.

3 This is one reason Wordsworth appears to startle himself at the conclusion of "Tintern Abbey" when he hands over the future to Dorothy; it is a future from which he is absent. I am grateful to Peter Ross's unpublished essay, "Some Problems with 'Tintern Abbey,'" for this insight.

4 Strategies of continuity and strategies of transcendence often undergrid the same ideology, for example as a foil against alienation. I concern myself with this issue in what follows by way of Carolyn Porter's excellent study of American literary history, Seeing and Being: The Plight of the Participant Observer, Emerson, James, Adams and Faulkner (Middletown, N.Y.: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), en passim.

5 "For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: and though this be true, poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings. . . ." William Wordsworth, preface to Lyrical Ballads (1800), Prefaces and Prologues to Famous Books, edited by Charles W. Eliot, LL.D. (New York: P. F. Collier & Son Corporation, 1938), 272.


9 Abel, p. 9.

10 The sui generis impulse is a characteristic of what Carolyn Porter calls "reified thought." This is alienated thought that essentializes and displaces itself outside of history, outside "sensuous human activity." This displacement which is also an attempt to "forget" history is yet another form of transcendence: "In The Literal Tradition in America, having examined 'the death by atrophy of the philosophic impulse,' which followed from the 'colossal liberal absolutism' dominating American political thought, Hartz asked whether "a people 'born equal' could ever understand peoples elsewhere
that have to become so." Hartz, in other words, was calling for a transcendence of the 'irrational Lockianism' which had served as the political vehicle for American innocence, in response to the dangers attendant upon the United States maintaining that innocence as a leading actor on the international stage." (Porter, 3-4) Would this transcendence of transcendence have been a move back into history--as Hartz no doubt desired--or would it too have been yet another instance of reification?

11 For example, Carolyn Porter's book is "textbook" Marxism to the extent that she never asks herself whether reification and alienation are consequences of mass societies wherever they exist as opposed to specific capitalist effects. She does note that Emerson raises the question himself in "Nature" where he assumes alienation as a "given in order to transform it into an illusion." Porter concludes: "If man's self-alienation is a given, eternal immutable condition, then Emerson's entire project proves a fool's game." But from this point on Porter's book rests on the assumption that alienation--contrary to Emerson--is an effect of capitalist relations and values. For example, Porter associates immediacy with metaphysics (Porter, 52); it would seem to follow that alienation--the effect of mediation--would indeed be a "given" that could be transformed into Emerson's "illusion" only by implying that the "real" is the "immediate" or non-alienated, that is, the metaphysical. She does not pursue these implications.

12 Maier xiv.

13 Maier xiv.

14 Maier xiv.

15 Maier's "revolutionaries" are Samuel Adams, Isaac Sears, Thomas Young, Richard Henry Lee and Charles Carroll. Her "Founding Fathers," the proponents of non-revolutionary independence, are John Jay, James Wilson, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton.

16 Whitman's, "Walt Whitman to Ralph Waldo Emerson" PNAP, 3.

17 Whitman, 3.


20 Whitman, "Walt Whitman to Ralph Waldo Emerson," 6-7.

21 Tallman, preface, PNAP, ix.

22 Tallman x.

23 Consider, for example, the different uses of history in the work of poets as various as Jerome Rothenberg, Charles Olson and Gary Snyder.


25 Ginsberg, 319.
26 Ginsberg, "When the Mode of the Music Changes the Walls of the City Shake," PNAP, 325-26.


30 In this respect, the sui generis impulse of the postmodernists may be read as a denial of their "origins" in history, that is, in prior poets and poems. See en passim Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

31 Even historical artifacts and events are treated as though they were contemporaneous with composition; hence the proliferation of the use of the present tense--as well as the "historical present"--in so many postmodernist poems. This tendency has been criticized by poets/editors like Nicholas Christopher and Grace Schulman.

32 "Although free verse, imagism, symbolism and other stylistic developments have made their mark, none of them has created a break between modern and traditional poetry as radical as the break between non-objective and representational painting, or between atonal and traditional music.... The point to be emphasized is that a large and entirely respectable part of contemporary poetry is simply indistinguishable from traditional poetry in the ways that would affect closure...."

"It is not surprising then that the same generation of poets that developed the song of uncertainty also gave new life to the oracular epigram, for if the one is naturally anti-closural, perhaps we might best see the other as anti-anti-closural." Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 236, 242.
CHAPTER TWO

All of the above revolves around my association of process-as-absence with openness and product-as-presence) with closure. But exactly what has been meant by openness per se and closure per se has--within the general field of textual studies--rarely been made explicit. And when these concepts have been dealt with in a more or less rigorous fashion we shall see that openness has frequently meant a polysemy and/or informality restricted in its movements by the closures of univocity in all its forms: authorial intention, central themes, coherency of structure, etc. This play of openness and closure manifests itself formally as process-as-absence under the auspices of product-as-presence. My point of departure shall be the "Projective Verse" essay by Charles Olson and Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End by Barbara Herrnstein-Smith. My transition from Olson to Herrnstein-Smith shall proceed by way of some recent studies by David Hult, Cairns Craig and Umberto Eco.¹ I shall show the limits of Olson's project as well as its ties to Eliot's modernism by discussing one of Olson's declared influences: bebop.

Despite conciliatory statements and qualifications that appear near the end of "Projective Verse" Charles Olson opens his manifesto with a polemic that is executed both rhetorically and typographically:

(projects) (percussive) (prospective)

vs.

The NON-Projective

(or what a French critic calls "closed" verse, that verse which print bred and which is pretty much what we have had in English & American and have still got despite the work of Pound and Williams:

it lead Keats, already a hundred years ago, to see it (Wordsworth's, Milton's) in the light of "the Egotistical Sublime"; and it persists at this latter day as what you might call the private soul-at-any-public-wall)²
The open parentheses function as an homage to the pioneering work of Cummings but what is of importance here are the militant diction and virulent anti-subjectivism. As the abbreviated "versus" in the center of the page shows--along with the words "(projectile" and "(percussive" (note how the open parentheses function as figures of the canon)--Olson conceives this confrontation in competitive, if not military, terms: projective verse inaugurates a "revolution of the ear' and precipitates 'the trochee's heave." Olson's project is meant to be a literal revolution because it simultaneously restores to poetry orality and aurality. It seeks to return to the throne "certain laws and possibilities of the breath of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings." Because the poet must learn to listen anew to pay attention to the "pressures of the breath," there can be no room for psychology; the ego is not so much repelled as ignored. Indeed, as the opening quote from "Projective Verse" indicates, Olson's sense of what constitutes closed verse is a complex of history-induced laziness and Romantic egotism: laziness because of the reliance on the tradition of figures and forms as opposed to an active and direct perception of the objects or experiences that unfold before the poet, and egotism because these conventional figures and forms serve not to illuminate objects and experiences but serve to reflect the creative powers of the poet.

Olson's projective verse theory was influenced by the theoretical advances of bebop--he admits as much in Muthologos 1.5 There are striking similarities between the relation of bebop to swing and the relation of projective verse to closed verse but there are also important differences. Unlike swing bebop is polyrhythmic; the unit of measure shifts from the bass pedal drum to the cymbals. With his right hand incessantly striking the cymbals, producing a shimmering sheet of sound and seamless rhythm--as opposed to the metronomic thud of the bass pedal drum--the bebop drummer is free to use his feet and left hand to accent the fundamental 4/4 blues beat with improvised syncopation. Just as important is the new phrasing of the bebop
saxophonists and trumpeters. Swing saxophonists and trumpeters were still bound by the meter of the score if not the score itself to which fidelity was expected. The bebop soloists transformed their instruments into vehicles of speech; their phrasings became speech-like that is irregular off-beat non-metrical. It is easy to see how these melodic and rhythmic innovations could affect the aesthetics of an Olson or Kerouac or Ginsberg, for the impetus behind bebop innovation was as cultural and political as the literary innovations of the Beats and Black Mountain writers. The complexities of bebop and subsequent jazz movements were developed by black musicians to foil the appropriating tendencies of white musicians, not because they were white but because white renditions of black jazz sold well to a public that could not believe blacks were capable of the complex and abstract reasoning this music required. If the public wanted bebop, however, it would have to go to the source. This insistence on authenticity is quite American in its valorization of the inimical originality of individual expression. 

Olson's ideas about process, content, form, and voice are directly influenced by bebop. What is significantly different, however, is the end to which his project aspires. Olson's emphasis on the ear and perception and attentiveness is meant to thwart individual expression or rather expression of the individual. When he writes that

Objectism [the ethical--as opposed to the formal--name of the project] is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the "subject" and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instruction to carry out) and those other creatures of nature which we may with no derogation, call objects

he is perhaps closer to the Eliot of "Tradition and the Individual Talent" than he realizes or desires. Of course, the goals of Eliot and Olson differ (the validation of the traditional canon on the one hand, the accurate portrayal of experience outside the poet
on the other). Or do they? Eliot desires fidelity to an epistemology (literature, Scripture etc.) while Olson desires fidelity to an ontology (history, persons, objects, etc.). But if ontology is only the effect of an epistemology then the distinction between the two blurs.⁸

The central difference between bebop and projective verse turns on the issue of individual expression. For many of the black jazz innovators many of whom were frustrated sidemen in swing orchestras, the suppression of their individual egos was tantamount to the suppression of their individual blackness. Olson's rejection of Romantic egotism seems not repressive because Anglo-Saxon Americans had had a long documented history of self-expression; no particular racial interdiction silenced their voices. But Olson's flight from ego--like Eliot's flight from personality--takes on an ominous cast from the perspective of black artists.

For Olson the "closed" poem is one that first and foremost succumbs to the standardization of Romantic self-consciousness. But there are also formal features that must be barred: "... inherited line stanza over-all form, what is the 'old' base of the non-projective."⁹ Rejecting metaphor, simile, figure, etc., Olson jettisons everything pertinent to closed verse that would later be delineated in Herrnstein-Smith's Poetic Closure. Yet, in breaking from the formality of closed verse, Olson's project, for all its concern with the "ear" and "breath," highlights the visual dimension of the poem by dispersing the words across the page in radically new formations. In fact, one could argue that the visual aspect of closed poems were subordinate to their auditory aspect because the forms were familiar and expected. The attack on closed verse forms leads not only or even primarily to a "revolution of the ear" but also, simultaneously, to a revolution of the eye.

The open poem will be both a "high energy construct and at all points an energy discharge."¹⁰ The open poem is a circuit of energy whose input "is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have several causations)" and whose output is "the
energy which the reader, which because he is a third term, takes over."11 The poem is thus the energy itself, the construct or form of an energy discharge, that is, the discharge of itself. The energy discharged from the poet takes a form that is "at least' equivalent to the original discharge and then radiates or transfers itself to the reader. If the energy transferred to the poem is "at least" equivalent to the energy "which propelled him in the first place,' then the poet may add to the original energy input, in short, amplify or accent the original causations. But if the energy in the poem is equivalent to the energy "which propelled him in the first place" then the poet is an open channel through which energy passes unobstructed.12 Amplifier or open channel: first question: can we not read here two choices that pose a dilemma for the poet? Second question: why the qualifier "at least"--as opposed to exact "equivalence"--when Olson will later say that it is the "lyrical interference of the individual as ego" that is to be avoided? Does not the "amplification" of the original impulse directly involve this "Interference?" Or is "objectism" the name of an ideal toward which projective verse tends? And what do "force" and "energy" mean here? These latter terms can only make sense if applied to the reader's psychological and physiological responses during the reading of the poem: how the poem affects the reader and how the reading affects the poem. Force or energy cannot, then, be a causation; both are effects, what results when reading begins. If no formalism can account for force and energy, perhaps it is because form and force refer to different things, form to the structures of a text, force to the responses of a reader. Perhaps this is why structuralism, for example, loses its potency when it moves from questions about syntax to questions about semantics, from stylistics to hermeneutics.13 Although a text orients a reader's understanding of a text, it can never produce that understanding. The production of meaning is the reader's labor. Thus a synchronic methodology that focuses primarily on textual issues will have problems. Only by historicizing and expanding its procedures does structuralism exchange its blind limitations for the self-conscious limitations of post-structuralism.
(2) is the principle, the law which presides conspicuously over such composition, and when obeyed, is the reason why a projective poem can come into being. It is this: FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT. (Or so it got phrased by one R. Creeley, and it makes absolute sense to me with this possible corollary, that right form, in any given poem, is the only and exclusively possible extension of content under hand.)

This law of the content, of what is underhand, can only be the law of a tradition or a history or, however unintended, common sense. The content which comes from "outside" the individual as ego is historical the moment it materializes in the poem; to follow its lead could only result in predictable metaphorical or literal "extensions." One runs up, here, against the limits of Imagism. Insofar as the poet is also historical it is only by leading and following the content--moving back and forth between, so to speak, versions of Wordsworth's "Egotistical Sublime" and Keats' "Negative Capability"--that Olson's "new" poetry can appear. And yet I'd wager that most poems--before and after Olson--were written under just this sort of psychological process. In this respect, projective verse is nothing new.

Thus "right form" opposes "imposed form," implying that closed forms separate form and content. But this assumption of Olson depends on a narrow conception of content: what the poem is "about" which, for Olson, are objects and experiences outside the poem. But what about acrostics, anagrams or other poetry forms--not to mention poems--that are about themselves? Creeley's statement broadens the concept of content by making it co-extensive with form. Thus Olson's "corollary" to Creeley's dictum is arbitrary. But for Olson it is also essential. Otherwise "inherited line, stanza, overall form" are always justifiable since they are literally never more than what the poem is on the page or in the air. One can always argue for the correctness of a form by appealing to a specific part of the content. How can one speak of the "wrong" form of a poem unless one
presumes to already know what its content "is"? Whatever its aims, Creeley's formulation dislodges the philosophical and formal moorings of Olson's project. The explicit tautological and "open" non-law of Creeley's statement is brought back into the service of projective verse under the form of what is no longer a mere declarative but is-in bold letters--an imperative.

The elevation of content over form in Olson's formulation reverses--not eliminates--the split and consequent hierarchy of form and content in New Criticism. Olson's valorization of content over form is typically American in its resistance to formalisms: anti-intellectualism against intellectualism (we brag about the subjects--like math and English--that were our "worst" in high school); the breath against the metric foot, individualism against socialization, etc. That these oppositions problematize or even contradict one another is beside the point for the anti-formulaic; in fact, it may be the point since the law of contradiction as a law is formulaic. Several questions: if Olson's work is inconsistent at best and self-contradictory at worst, would this have been a problem for Olson? Is "Projective Verse" meant to be more whimsical than rigorous? Have I swallowed the bait by taking this essay seriously?

The importance of the problem cannot be sidestepped. I am justified in this traditional and logical analysis of Olson's text only to the extent that his argument conforms to the contours of rational argument even if this conformity is hollow--a shell game. Otherwise, anything I write about this essay is literally beside the point--on different terms and a different turf. Thus far I have read one Olson "law" of projective verse, and the term law, which is also the name of a formula, seems to justify the mode of this critique. This law--the co-extension of "right form" and content--is the law of organicism, the interrelationship of mind, nature, and language. Insofar as organicism recalls Wordsworthian Romanticism, which is itself by no means irrational or anti-intellectual, Olson remains within the purview of reason.

Now (3) the process of the thing, how the principle can be made so to shape the
energies that the form is accomplished. And I think it can be boiled down to one statement (first pounded into my head by Edward Dahlberg): **ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION.**

This then is the "how" of the law, how it—projective verse as the co-extension of form and content—is to be practiced. The necessity of immediacy and directness is clear. If the poet is an open channel, then ideally nothing delays or deters the transfer of energy from perception to page, causations to script. Let us not, however, forget the "at least" that authorizes the amplification of energy. At this point, perhaps, Olson's admonition against the "lyrical interference of the individual as ego" can be read as not a concern about fidelity to the original impulse of energy but a concern that the ego might supplant the original perception with its own imaginations. Amplification would thus serve as a guarantor that the original impulse, however "weakened" by the perhaps inevitable interference of the ego even under ideal conditions, would be safely transported to the page. On the surface this might appear as a concern about the objectivity of the original impulse, but if the poet is to obey the dictum of immediacy and directness, then there is at least a concomitant elevation of the supposed ego-less poet. For perception is what the poet does. To say that his perceptions must immediately and directly follow one another is to place a great deal of faith in the accuracy and facility of the poet's mind. One must suppose that only a sensibility trained during long years of study and reflection and practice can enact projective verse. What the "how" of the law of projective verse does is combine a Wordsworthian insistence on sensibility development with a Kerouacian spontaneity. Indeed it may not be too farfetched to regard Kerouac's spontaneous prose as the literary descendant of Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of feeling" (and an elision of the accompanying "recollected in tranquility"). Moreover, Olson's notion of one perception leading immediately and directly to another parallels Ginsberg's "First thought best thought." And just as the "Egotistical Sublime" overpowers nature and Ginsberg's style and personality permeate his prose, there is a danger that the poet will
in the final analysis supplant his objects.\textsuperscript{16}

A less charitable view of these projects might align them with word association games or Rorscharch charts, both of which depend on the subject's expressing his immediate thoughts to strip away convention and habit to get at so-called subconscious reality. Yet even there—if there is a there—what is valorized is mind. This mind, Freudian or not, is the resident of culture and history despite the consciousness of objects as others (the objectivist conscience) that keeps at bay the ego. Conscience-ness stands watch over the passage of energy from the original impulse to the poem.

Now if the integrity of the impulse is preserved, so too the parade of perceptions. The stream of perceptions must be continuous to ward off interference as the perceptions themselves. Once again we arrive at a precarious moment in this essay: the uneasy balancing of process and perception. For the valorization of the former threatens to shift the balance to the style of the poem, the process itself, effectively reducing the significance of the perceptions (Olson's content). For Olson, style is neither content nor form but that which conjoins the two; thus it is the vehicle of the ego, the expression of personality. Insofar as content and form can only conjoin under the direction and authority of style, the ego, however untheatrical and unobtrusive, is never completely excised from the poem. Style--relationship itself--shows how the poet meshes form and content, shows how he "breathes":

\begin{quote}
I take it that PROJECTIVE VERSE teaches, this lesson, that that verse will do in which a poet manages to register both the acquisitions of his ear and the pressures of his breath . . . In any given instance, because there is a choice of words, the choice, if a man is in there, will be, spontaneously, the obedience of his ear to the syllable.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

Here the moral imperative noted earlier in reference to the conscience becomes explicit. The ethics of projective verse--objectism--demand that the ear subordinate itself to the syllable. But is it possible for the ego to remain uninvolved in perceptions? Olson
himself seems to suggest that the ego must get involved: "So is it not the PLAY of a mind we are after, is not that that shows whether a mind is there at all?"  

Since the conscience supervises the expression of personality--the ego as consciousness--neither of these play. This leaves the subconscious. But what if the subconscious is never "itself" but only the effect of the ego embattled with the conscience? Could one ever "write" or "say" the play of the subconscious as such? Would not one instead write or say the struggle between the conscience and conscious? Or: what if the ego is itself a construct of the subconscious, a vehicle by which the "drives" express themselves? In this case one writes or says the struggle between the conscience and subconscious (though it is no longer "sub" anything). And finally, it is possible to view the conscience as an effect of the conscious and subconscious. This play, then, however conceived, is already not a play but a telos or synthesis (in the Hegelian sense) whether the "mind" takes the form of a family drama or identity as the reflection of difference.

However he conceives "play," Olson believes that the mind plays through voicing because speech is the "solid of verse, is the secret of a poem's energy, because now, a poem has, by speech, solidity. . . ."  

It is now only a matter of the recognition of the conventions of composition by field for us to bring into being an open verse as formal as the closed, with all the traditional advantages.

What are the consequences of ushering a projective verse under the laws of conventions into the history of poetry? What distinctions are to be made between "closed verse" and "formal" verse? This distinction itself suggests that projective verse calls forth new forms; in this only lies its difference from the "inherited" forms of closed verse. If "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN THE EXTENSION OF CONTENT," every projective verse practitioner is free to select his own forms. But Olson wants "right forms," "conventions of composition by field," to bring into existence an "open verse as formal as the closed, with all the traditional advantages." By legislating the terms and conditions
of open verse, Olson delimits its field of possibility even before its inauguration as open verse. The anxiety implied by this foreclosure of possibility is related to the spectre of the ego Olson sees looming beyond the horizon of "conventions of composition by field."

For if every projective verse poet made up his own rules and conventions, would Olson not see in the sui generis impulse egomania in the guise of openness? By implementing laws for all field composition, Olson hopes to objectify—that is, scientificize—creativity.

Ironically, the objectification of projective verse can only take place in the medium that has been under attack throughout "Projective Verse": writing:

What we have suffered from is manuscript, press, removal of verse from its producer and its reproducer, the voice, a removal by one, by two removes from its place of origin and its destination. For the breath has a double meaning which Latin had not yet lost.

The irony is, from the machine has come one gain not yet sufficiently observed or used, but which leads indirectly toward projective verse and its consequences. It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of places & phrases, which he intends.22

From the moment this project acquires the title "COMPOSITION BY FIELD," even if it is one of several, the word "FIELD" tells us that we are already speaking of spacing, writing, far from the mythic presence of time and speech. Projective verse is here explicitly dependent on typing and spacing since handwriting is too irregular, too personal, too stylish--like speech. The typewriter normalizes writing, and so it is the keeper of the law of composition by field. Speech, breath, and all the other hallmarks of projective verse will from here on be dependent on type. Handwriting and speech are both too idiosyncratic, which is why, from the tablets of Moses to the Declaration of
Independence, the laws of the West are written down. Despite, then, Olson's polemical appeals to the "solidity" of projective verse--speech, the very thing that distinguishes the objectivist ethic from the Imagist ethic, is subordinated to the authority of writing.

One might object that from Olson's perspective the typewriter serves only as the press that prints the score from which the breathing poet performs, and, truth to tell, Olson does indeed draw the musical analogy to illustrate the proper--that is, delimited--function of type. This does nothing, however, to alter the fact that the performing poet remains dependent on the "score," even if, as with some jazz "renditions" of standard songs, the score is the point of departure to which one never returns. Moreover, since words--unlike musical notes--can be read without being heard (even if words are not univocal signifiers like math symbols), Olson's formulation makes speech dependent on type but type independent of speech. Under this formulation, one can silently scan a poem, but one cannot recite a poem without the guiding cursor of the word underhand or ingrained in the engrams of memory as interiorized "writing." One ironic result is that recited "closed verse" is more independent of writing precisely because the forms are inherited and thus familiar. It is generally easier to memorize a sonnet than an open poem of comparable length. Olson cannot see the tendency of the ear to seek or impose a pattern because of his apotheosis of speech and breath. In attempting to free speech and breath from the supposed tyranny of inherited line and stanza, Olson forgets that speaking and breathing are themselves regularized and regularizing activities. This "forgetfulness" is related to his idealization of speech as freedom from the tradition of forms. But it is, for Olson, too much freedom. Thus the law of the typewriter to constrain the "solidity" of speech.

Despite his attempts to hold onto speech and temporal concerns when discussing strategies of field composition, Olson invariably finds himself drawn back to the terminology of writing and spacing. For example, he demonstrates that the phrase "length" is a spatial concept: "If a contemporary poet leaves a space as long as the phrase
before it, he means that space to be held, by the breath, an equal length of time."23 More often than not, his examples of field composition are explicitly spatial: "If he [the poet] suspends a word or syllable at the end of a line (this was Cummings' addition) he means that time to pass that it takes the eye--that hair of time suspended--to pick up the next line."24 Nothing passes across a page except the eye. Perhaps he too recognizes the weakness of these breath-line examples, for Olson soon returns to the ear:

Already they [Pound and Williams] are composing as though verse was to have the re-acting its writing involved, as though not the eye but the ear was to be its measurer, as though the intervals of its composition could be carefully put down as to be precisely the intervals of its registration. For the ear, which one had the burden of memory to quicken it (rime and regular cadence were its aids and have merely lived on in print after the oral necessities were ended) can now again, that the poet has his means, be the threshold of projective verse.25

Following Olson I ask here: if "rime and regular cadence" are anachronisms in the era of print and the press, can we not say exactly the same, and, moreover, for the same reasons, of the ear? By clinging nostalgically to the oral and aural, does Olson not perpetuate what is perhaps the last anachronism of poetry, an element many consider essential for poetry to be poetry: sound itself? Is there any "reason" today to practice still a poetry of the ear when so many of our technological, philosophical and cultural signs point to a world of the eye? Why should the solidity of the mark on the page be any less viable an object than "speech-force" conceived as "objects, things, etc."? From a material point of view, isn't the mark at least as dense, at least as much a thing, as the phoneme? For example: is "concrete poetry" not poetry?

Despite the inconsistencies and contradictions I have read in Olson's text, perhaps both the eye and ear are unimportant in themselves, mere channels through which the body manifests itself--in air, on paper. Poetry would then be, for Olson, both a bar of music and stroke of paint pointing back to their creators: a mouth and hand in dialogue
From the moment the projective purpose of the act of verse is recognized, the content does--it will--change. If the beginning and the end is breath, voice in its largest sense, then the material of verse shifts. It has to. What seem to me a more valid formulation [than Pound's and Williams' Objectivism] for present use is "objectism," a word to be taken to stand for a kind of relation of man to experience which a poet might state as the necessity of a line or a work to be as wood is, to be as clean as wood can be when a man has had his hand to it.

Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects.26

Subjectivism, the "lyrical interference of the individual as ego," separation from what man "is as a creature of nature," constitutes the impulse of Romantic anxiety. But despite the attempt to call objects as such "with no derogation," the individual as subject constitutes objects: the simultaneous construction of subject/object polarity is generated as ego. The moment ones writes to or about the other, one has made the other an object (direct, indirect, prepositional, etc.) Before its transformation into object the other is a subject of its own. But a stand that respects the other's subjectivity means absolute silence. For Olson, the projectivist ego decides what to write; the objectist conscience of the projectivist decides how to write. And the decision about what to write is culturally bounded and historically influenced--"interference," lyrical or not, if ever there was. The individual as ego does not have to write about itself to write about itself. Autobiography is perhaps most present when it is least apparent. Perhaps this is why Olson will imply that ego manifests itself in the sprawl of outward vision. The poet
of projective verse, however, must look within, work into his body to discern the rhythms appropriate to the incoming stream of perceptions. The projective verse poet discerns in himself the rhythms of the other that constitute in part the poet himself:

If he sprawl, he shall find little to sing but himself, and shall sing, nature has such paradoxical ways, by way of artificial forms outside himself. But if he stays within himself, if he is constrained within his nature as he is participant in the larger forces, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share.27

Insofar as breath is its own origin and destination, "voice in its largest sense," objects give secrets to the poet that he can use to solidify his own speech, his own breath. This is why the object must be taken and taken seriously, literally: that is, inward by way of the eye and ear, ego and conscience, and then outward, through the lungs, throat and mouth, shoulder, arm and hand. This series ensures the fidelity, the solidity, of objectism: "For a man's problems, the moment he takes speech up in all its fullness, is to give his work a seriousness, a seriousness sufficient to cause the thing he makes to try to take its place alongside the things of nature."28

The poet, however, is not merely one object among others in the field of experience. He is privileged both as man ("But breath is man's special qualification as animal") and poet ("For I would hazard the guess that, if projective verse is practiced long enough, is driven ahead hard enough along the course I think it dictates, verse again can carry much larger material than it has carried in our language since the Elizabethans").29 The revitalization of the dramatic--with epical overtones--is part and parcel of the desire "to cause the thing he makes to take its place alongside the things of nature." Here the poet acquires almost divine attributes. He not only creates things, but with his breath he gives them life on the stage of the poem as world. The poet is here god or priest. It is not surprising that Olson cites Eliot and takes him to task as an inadequate maker, a limited god-poet who failed to breath life into his would-be poems-as-worlds:
It could be argued that it is because Eliot has stayed inside the non-projective that he fails as a dramatist—that his root is the mind alone, and a scholastic mind at that (no high intelletto despite his apparent clarities)—and that, in his listenings he has gone from his find ear outward rather than, as I say a projective poet will, down through the workings of his own throat to that place where breath comes from, where breath has its beginning, where drama has to spring from, where, the coincidence is, all act springs.30

Is this what projective verse—objectism come to at last—the resuscitation of the poet heretofore a mere mimic of dead forms? The apotheosis of the poet into a creator of a breath-filled thing that takes its rightful place among the objects of nature? It is clear that this project that emphasizes the projection of breath into words, the thingness of things, goes hand-in-hand with the suppression of the "lyrical interference of the individual as ego." But what of this appeal to a poetry of dramatic and epical dimensions? Their revitalization marks the failure to open or close poetry in any essentialist sense of openness and closure because (1) the dramatic and epical impulse belongs to the tradition of inherited forms, and (2) the ego reasserts itself most notably and nobly in the drama and epic. Moreover, this impulse had already made its reappearance in this century in the work of Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Lowry, Proust, Mann, etc. And when we think of Maximus do we not think of Olson? And think of him not just because he wrote the poem but because he is suffused throughout the poem? These writers "appear" in their works not necessarily as (Olson's attenuated) "content" but as "style": these writers are how they write.

One last example. Is it not Olson's ego that imagines it can exclude and supplant "the Classical-representational by the primitive abstract...," by which he means "'primary' as how one finds anything, pick it up as one does new--fresh/first"? Olson assumes that this usurping allows one equal access "across history and back" even as the "objectivist" in him acknowledges that "(The Hopi say what goes on over there isn't
happening here therefore it isn't the same pure 'localism' of space-time, but such location can now be called: what you find out for yourself ('isterin) keeps all accompanying circumstances..." a statement that says both yes and no to historical contingencies. In Olson's recognition and denial of the limitations imposed by history we see a sturdy descendant of Wordsworth who valorized both the linkage and gulf between parts and wholes. Wordsworth often conceives of human existence as damnation inasmuch as it entails the "forgetting" of pre-existent innocence. Thus condemned to partial knowledge, the post-partum poet intimates the forgotten whole: pre-existence recaptured in immortality. It may well be this sense of partiality and enclosure that motivates Olson's desire for projection and openness. For the projectivist poet confined to his space-time, transcendence of his "localism" must take place by recourse to the "primitive abstract." Note that it is not the poem, the "primitive abstract," that projective thing, that transcends history. Instead it is the poet. If I call this claim grandiose regardless of who or what is supposed to transcend time, I must also lay the blame squarely at the feet—even if breath rather than metric—of Olson's individual as ego.

The projective poet desires to always live by means of his poetry, and so he required the "primitive abstract" to be as many things to as many people as many times possible. Olson's conspicuous ignoring or ignorance of the politics of canonization arises either from a crass careerism (and so the "primitive abstract" is the guarantee of academic credibility and relevance) or from an incredibly naive belief that such a poetry will somehow outflank academia and drive straight into the lives of the common folk, whoever, whenever, and wherever he or she may be (and so the "primitive abstract" operates at the level of primary experience—whatever that might mean—to appeal to all). And yet the failure to account at least for canonization procedures and conventions makes Olson apparently forget the possibility that a reader of poetry may be as comfortable with topical and historically specific poetry as he is with poetry that seems
to speak beyond its epoch.

Projective poetry is without question a significant movement in the development of contemporary poetics. What I question are its extravagant claims to openness as the reigning in of the individual as ego. Projective poetry opens and closes in the same movement; an open poetry under the directives of laws, and thus only comparatively open, is simultaneously a poetry whose closure of the ego is only comparatively successful.

* * *

If to open poetry is to simultaneously close it (for example, "open forms" that simultaneously close off the presumed closure of "inherited line, stanza . . . "), then one may question whether the semantic and syntactic fields of poetry are really "open" so much as enlarged or altered. As we shall see in the next chapter, it is the concept of form itself that allows us to think the possibility that "open" poems are in truth "enlarged" or "altered" poems, both of which presume limits, horizons, demarcations—in short, form.

The restricted play of polysemy is the object of study for the semiologist. In this respect, the work of Umberto Eco is exemplary. As the oeuvre of Eco demonstrates convincingly, polysemy is the name of play under the jurisdiction of a science: semiology. Nevertheless, Eco concerns himself explicitly with the concepts of openness and closure in his 1984 study, *The Role of the Reader*. As we shall see, it is not coincidental that the problem of openness and closure comes up in a study of the reader. Hardly objective concepts, openness and closure are rewritten and blurred by Eco as questions: openness for someone? closure for someone?

Eco begins his examination with what might strike us as a curious inversion of our general notions of open and closed texts:

Those texts that obsessively aim at arousing a precise response on the part of more or less empirical readers . . . are in fact open to any possible 'aberrant'
decoding. A text 'immoderately' open to any possible interpretation will be called a closed one.\textsuperscript{32}

The distance of this formulation from those of Olson is significant. Openness and closure are not only textual strategies here (the "what" and "how of projective verse and objectism), but also reading strategies, however oriented and determined by textual strategies. For Eco, the text that is immoderate, the text that holds itself open to "any 'aberrant' decoding," is closed. And the text that obsessively strives to arouse precise responses from the reader is open. Why such apparently oxymoronic formulations? Because, for one, the unabashed text closes off the active participation of the reader. Having said everything, or, at least, too much, within its field of rhetoric, the text leaves the reader with nothing to say. And the obsessively monomaniacal text can always be read for all that it does not say, the silences it guards. One might gather from the psychoanalytical language of my analysis that the first text that chatters incessantly is "healthy" while the second text that says the same thing over and over again is "ill" and needs to be cured by the critic-as-analysand. It is no coincidence that Eco, the author of the classicist \textit{The Name of the Rose}, is essentially a classicist/modernist, a lover of the classical texts that can always be "opened" by the critic. It is quite possible that Eco's tastes and preferences have determined in advance his critical theory. Is it not always a question of openness for whom, closure for whom?

Let me not go on without noting Eco's language in the above passage, a language which justifies our anthropomorphic vocabulary: "obsessively," "arousing," "immoderate." The ethics of desire and taboo are at work here in full force. Thus I paraphrase--again--Eco: the nude open text nullifies the desire of the reader for the text. The reader's desire is not directed at the body of the text but at the stripping away, the undoing, of its clothes: the texts' univocal precision. This is why the text that "obsessively aims at arousing a precise response" is open to decoding. Dressed in its univocality to obtain a precise response, the text can always be undressed. And once again it is the stripping
away—in short, reading itself—that excites the reader as he traces the threads of meaning. The foregoing play is doubtless caricature but caricature justified by Eco's appropriation of the language of taboo and desire. Eco's ethic determines in advance what texts will be opened and what texts will be closed.

For Eco, however much a closed text may be opened, the text cannot be made to show or say just anything, for it still operates under the horizon of an ineluctable authority. The horizon and authority is the text itself; the text is its own lexicon: "You cannot use a text as you want, but only as the text wants you to use it. An open text, however 'open' it be, cannot afford whatever interpretation."33 If my objectification of the text above remained suspect, this passage makes it clear that Eco authorizes such a transformation. As a being-for-and-to-itsel, the text can never "afford whatever interpretation." Any interpretation that is not authorized by the text opens unlimited intratextual and intertextual possibilities. For Eco the text—and he means first and foremost its materiality, the words themselves—serves as the ground for all interpretative strategies. This is why placing the text in its historical context poses a threat to its supposed integrity. Even the most academic historicist readings—for example, Marxist—puts the lie to the text as a self-contained plenitude. Eco's semiology is here but another moment in the epoch of New Critical formalism.

Eco's valorization of the text orients his argument. His notion that a closed text can be "surgically 'opened"' by examining the "ideological structures of the text" in which, for instance, "fiction is transformed into document and the innocence of fancy is translated into the disturbing evidence of a philosophical statement," both erases and reinscribes an old prejudice: the distinction between literary and non-literary texts on the basis of truth-claims. The distinction is erased to the extent that the phrase "ideological structures of the text" suggests political readings that undermine the commonplace belief in the non-literariness of the political text and the apolitical aesthetics of the literary text. But this distinction is redrawn to the extent one believes
it is a different kind (as opposed to degree) of reading which "opens" a text. For how can a text be opened by that (the "political," for instance) which is already inscribed within it, be opened to that which the text authorizes? In short, can any reading predetermined by the text be called "open?" Doubtless this dilemma bears down on the question of structure and destroys it with its force. This is why Eco admits both the necessity of accounting for force and yet, as always, attempts to keep force within the field of semiology: "The aesthetic dialectic between openness and closedness of text depends on the basic structures of the process of text interpretation in general." Is not the articulation of the structure of process the dream of semiology in general? What interests me here is the matter of a decided and subtle shift in Eco's argument. If texts determine the breadth and range of interpretations, if the "aesthetic dialectic between openness and closedness" is determined by interpretations, then it is not a matter of the openness and closedness of texts. It becomes a matter of the extent to which texts resist or facilitate open and closed interpretations. Now if one, in fact, cannot describe text structures in terms of openness and closedness, and yet the concept of structure implies such terminology, then texts can no longer be exhaustively described in terms of structure period.

Have I now negated what I've been saying all along: that openness and closedness are applicable to texts as long as one understood that the terms implied and were dependent on one another, that there are only relatively open and closed structures within texts, that texts themselves are not open or closed? Perhaps not if I argue that what was cited in texts were not only or primarily structures per se but features or aspects. The question then shifts: do these features or aspects somehow exceed structure as object but constitute structure as relation? But if these aspects and features are forces, and forces exceed all structure--whether object or relation--the question shifts once again: can "force" be something without being a thing, a structure? If force is that which exceeds structure and allows structure to exist as such, is force then but another name for
desire or history? For example, does Marxism find its impetus—and perhaps epistemological obstacle or complement—in Freudianism?35 These things and more concern the next two chapters. I return to Eco's text to prepare the ground for my upcoming responses to these issues.

Everything I have read thus far in The Role of the Reader comes from its introduction. I have already drawn a link between Eco's science of polysemia and New Critical formalism. Any doubts about this link should be put to rest by the opening chapter, "The Poetics of the Open Work":

A work of art, therefore, is a complete and closed form in its uniqueness as a balanced organic whole, while at the same time constituting an open product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its un adulterable specificity.36

This could just as well have come from Cleanth Brooks' The Well-Wrought Urn. What unites New Criticism and semiology is the unquestioned authority and sanctity of the text, which is why the role of the reader, however productive of "countless different interpretations," remains subservient to the authority of the text. No matter how polysemous the production of interpretations, the horizon constituted by the text always delimits and defines what the interpreter can say. What makes this passage of particular interest, however, is yet another shift in Eco's definition of openness and closedness. Now all "works of art" are closed; what is open is the quantity of interpretations the art work authorizes. In that respect, then, there is no such event as a dialectic of openness and closedness, no thesis and antithesis, because these terms do not apply to the same thing (a text). Rather, they apply to different planes of experience: one ontological (texts) and one epistemological (interpretations), products and processes, presences and absences. Despite all appearances of fecundity, the reader's interpretative processes remain caught within the orbit of the "balanced organic whole" presence of the text. Eco says this in almost the same language:
In the Middle Ages there grew up a theory of allegory which posited the possibility of reading the Scriptures . . . not just in the literal sense, but also in three other senses: the moral, the allegorical, and the analogical. . . . A work in this sense is undoubtedly endowed with a measure of "openness." The reader of the text knows that every sentences and every trope is "open" to a multiplicity of meanings which he must hunt for and find. Indeed, according to how he feels at one particular moment, the reader might choose a possible interpretative key which strikes him as exemplary of this spiritual state. He will use the work according to the desired meaning (causing it to come alive again, somehow different from the way he viewed it at an earlier reading). However, in this type of operation, "openness" is far removed from meaning "indeterminateness" of communication, "infinite" possibilities of form, and complete freedom of reception. What in fact is made available is a range of rigidly pre-established and ordained interpretative solutions, and these never allow the reader to move outside the strict control of the author.37

The origin of hermeneutics serves as an able subject and analogy for the roles of the reader and author. Just as the layman is submissive to the Word of God, so the reader prostrates himself before the omnipotence of the word of the author. The reader does not produce meaning in the sense of creation. According to whim or proclivity, he merely raises meaning from the deadness of print and custom, transfigured and "somehow different from the way he viewed it at an earlier reading." Under the best of circumstances, the reader may indeed be a Christ-like figure, a raiser of the dead, but like Him, the reader too cannot simply do as he pleases. Both throw aside received wisdom and embark on a parabolic journey that takes them far afield but never beyond the power of God and the Author. They always return to the flock or fold.

I leave Eco with his concluding words that reproduce the contradictions and problems that from the start beset his text:
We have, therefore, seen that (i) "open" works, insofar as they are in movement, are characterized by the invitation to make the work together with the author and that (ii) on a wider level (as a minimal subgenus in the species "work in movement") there exists works which, though organically completed, are "open" to a continuous generation of internal relations which the addressee must uncover and select in his act of perceiving the vitality of incoming stimuli (iii). Every work of art, even though it is produced by following an explicit or implicit poetics of necessity, is effectively open to a virtually unlimited range of possible readings, each of which causes the work to acquire new vitality in terms of one particular taste, or perspective, or personal performance.38

Such is Eco's speculation on the question of openness, openness since Eco associates closedness with either the text as an organic unity or with the interpretative limitations imposed by the "immoderate" text. On this view, openness and closedness are relative terms with no absolute reference point except the "author's intention," as Eco puts it. To say, then, that a text is "more open" than what the author intended is also to say it is "less closed," which is to say that openness and closedness are trivial, impoverished terms that have as much significance as the proverbial half-empty and half-full glass of water. What is significant is whether one calls the glass of water half-empty or half-full. Openness and closedness are thus less formal terms in a dialectic than a matter of ethico-political choice: the will of the reader. I continue, however, to submit these terms to analysis to see if the remainder of a shell or the essentiality of a kernel resists my investigation.39

* * *

A recent edition of Yale French Studies concerns itself with Concepts of Closure. In his meticulous introduction David Hult both defines and distinguishes closure from end:

As a spatial description, "closure" initially encompasses all the coordinates appertaining to circumscribed territory: the "enclosed place" itself; "that which
encloses"; and "the fact of being enclosed."\textsuperscript{40}

Despite the mixture of nominal and verbal forms the term can assume, Hult reminds us that closure is "Essentially a verbal form." Specifically, it derives from the "(Latin clausura, a participial form of the verb claudere, 'to shut or close" and "stands in stark contrast to the nominal form of the Germanic word 'end'." But this definition of "end" does not justify excluding or reducing its verbal facet, the act of ending and naming an end, a facet that problematizes the verbal/nominal distinction. Still I endorse the apparently irreducible verbality of closure--as both verb and noun--as demanding a \textit{fortiori} "a line of inquiry which is at least as attentive to openings as closings."

Whether closure is conceived as nominal or verbal, the question of openings and closings in terms of closure is the question of the "discourse--or the framing of artistic works."

Thus the question of closure "must necessarily dwell on that which forms the work \textit{from the outside and which consequently excludes itself}" Why should that which "forms the work \textit{from the outside} necessarily exclude itself? Although Hult never explicitly justifies this assertion, one possible justification may be read more or less embedded in the following:

\begin{quote}
But what "closure" discovers as well is that the inner movement in the direction of unity or completeness, toward which any literary work must be considered to aspire by virtue of its being an artistic object, is itself a provocative form of incompleteness calling for a commentative discourse.\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

The inner movement of the text toward unity or completeness is symptomatic of its inability to achieve closure alone. The text needs the reader to close its exposed or open side (to the reader) with a commentary. The text opens up to that which closes it by excluding itself; the commentary both completes or closes the text and verifies its inability to alone close.

For all its superior sophistication and clarity, Hult's formulation retains the spirit of Eco's project. For Eco, the text is already a closed "balanced organic whole" that
nonetheless authorizes a plethora of readings. For Hult, the text is never closed prior to the commentary which arrives to close it by excluding itself. Hult's formulation of commentary excluding itself by virtue of being commentary is suspiciously close to Heidegger's notion of being making its presence and absence felt by withdrawing from the world. Commentary allows the "inner movement" of the text to come to a stop, to an end, under the authority of interpretation. What unites Eco and Hult is precisely the notion of a border between text and commentary. It is the question and possibility of the frame and framing that is of concern here. Both Eco and Hult assume the possibility of the frame. For them the difference between text and commentary is a given. However problematized the question of openness and closure, this distinction of the frame remains in place, secure and undisturbed. If in Eco the text is already a presenting of what is in fact already present, in Hult the text is a process on its way to the presence of completion. What is not thought is that the text "in its movement" (Eco) or in its "inner movement" (Hult) perhaps moves under no teleology. Perhaps the text has no reason for becoming other than becoming--movement "itself."

But even that formulation submits to Eco's and Hult's mystification, for the text in fact never moves. At least not Eco's and Hult's text: the words on the page. Perhaps the "other" "text"--the series of hypotheses and evaluations in the brain of the reader--is the text that moves. This "text" belongs to Wolfgang Iser's reader in his reader-response theory.

Openness and closedness, openness and closure: the "and" here presumes the equivalence and coordination of both terms. Closure would have nothing to close and closedness would not be possible without the ever-present threat of openness. Never one without the other, though one is always under the rule of the other. Openness is traditionally conceived only under the concomitant necessity that it can be and will be closed by the autonomy of the text (Eco's closedness) or the historical contingency of the reader (Hult's closure).
In his study *Yeats, Eliot, Pound and the Politics of Poetry*, Cairns Craig contemplates our desire for completion and closure even when we realize that absolute closings are impossible:

And the desire for a single pattern has been equally evident in the case of Eliot's own work: there would not have been the same excitement over the manuscripts of *The Waste Land* had there not been expectations that at last the "missing links" would appear and the poem would be returned to a proper univocal meaning.

Faced by the open poem we seek an ingress to the author's psyche, his reading, or his personal life, or his unconscious, in order to know that we are providing the poem with its appropriate links.44

The effect of Eliot's poem on critics undermines both the modernist ideal of the organic epical work of art and any distinction between modernism and postmodernism on the basis of openness and closedness. The modernists may have desired closure as much as the postmodernists desired openness, but as I noted above, closure and openness are reading choices regardless of how completed or fragmented a text appears.

Here is Craig again:

The open poem is turned towards us for its completion, to our memories, for its fulfillment. It can never have the kind of coherence of structure we expect of other forms of poetry, because its real totality is composed not on the page, but in the fusing of what the poet offers with the multitudinous suggestions it generates within us.45

As in Eco and Hult, so in Craig the reader closes off the open poem. But what if the open poem is turned elsewhere? If the open poem turns toward itself, for example, is it still possible to speak of its "real totality?" How can what goes on indefinitely beyond the text be enclosed within the concept of totality? Does not infinity exceed totality? If the poem is not its own opening and the reader is not its own closing, thus permitting an interminable dialogue or polylogue of questions and answers both between and beyond
text and reader, if all of this is not only inescapable but in play every time the reader reads, then the poem is not only open-ended because it tends toward no one for its completion, but it is also open-beginning because it is no longer possible to say exactly where a poem begins or from whom it derives. Certainly there is an "opening" line and a specified author. But think of The Waste Land: isn't Pound as much its author as Eliot? For example, aren't the literary executors of Poe and Thomas Wolfe as much authors as those we deem authors? And following Harold Bloom, what about other writers, the literary tradition, American and Western and Eastern cultures?

If I no longer privilege the author or the text or the reader but circulate them within the orbit of my analysis, it is because I wish to conceive of openness no longer under the teleology of an end.46

But is it possible to escape the bondage of author to text, text to reader, reader to author, the selfhood of text-reader-author? "Thus the poet has to close the theoretical openness of history (the past) in order to impose himself upon history (the future). And the closure of the past into a single myth is also the closure of memory."47 Craig echoes Nietzsche's "active forgetfulness" and Barthes' notion of writing as forgetting.48 To sleep, to dream, to remain silent, is to remember history. To wake from that nightmare requires the speaking of a consciousness unhappy because it knows that it speaks to close the past only on the condition that closure take the form of "a single myth." It is the illusion of a closure belied by the historicity of the unhappy consciousness: it can never attain the timeless state of myth.

Once again we witness the poverty of the concept of closure. Geoffrey Hartman, for example, associates the emptiness of the concept of closure with "the impotence of aesthetic theory." This insight is precise. But even if closure remains "a relatively bloodless notion," it also remains true that the concept of closure is symptomatic of deeper and more perplexing problems of form.49

* * *
Barbara Herrnstein-Smith's *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* conflates the nominal and verbal senses of closure in Hult's essay as well as Hult's distinctions between closure and end. Since Herrnstein-Smith's study precedes Hult's by some fifteen years, it is tempting to read Hult's work as a critical clarification of the closure/end differences Herrnstein-Smith confuses. But despite the fact that her book's title suggests a conflation of closure and end, the analyses themselves imply a difference between the two concepts.

* * *

The organization of the chapters that follow was dictated by the basic proposition that closure--the sense of finality, stability and integrity--is an effect that depends primarily upon the reader's experience of the structure of the entire poem.  

This statement from her introduction is self-protective insofar as the "was dictated" indicates a working hypothesis; no claims about its eventual validity or invalidity are proposed. For Herrnstein-Smith, "validity and invalidity," as terms related to strictly logical forms (propositions), can only be used to describe her argument after the reader has read her entire text. As I examine and criticize conclusions reached within chapters we will see that some of our observations will have been reached by Herrnstein-Smith in later chapters. What will be of significance and interest for me are those criticisms and observations I make that are not neutralized by Herrnstein-Smith's recognition of the same.

In terms of my immediate concern, Herrnstein-Smith's definition of closure implicitly distinguishes closure and end in contradistinction to the title of her study. Here, closure does not concern how poems end but how poems are experienced by the reader as closed. This distinction--implicit here--becomes explicit to the extent that Herrnstein-Smith goes on to distinguish closure as a function of art events or structures and end as a function of non-art events or structures. What she leaves unquestioned are
the possibilities of closure and end as synonymous or separate characteristics of either art of non-art events. Thus

The ringing of a telephone, the blowing of the wind, the babbling of an infant in its crib: these stop. A poem or a piece of music concludes. We tend to speak of conclusions when a sequence of events has a relatively high degree of structure, when, in other words, we can perceive these events as related to one another by some principle of organization or design that implies the existence of a definite termination point. Under these circumstances, the occurrence of the terminal event is a confirmation of expectations that have been established by the structure of the sequence, and is usually distinctly gratifying. The sense of stable conclusions, finality, or "clinch" which we experience at that point is what is referred to here as closure.51

All these examples, both art and non-art, require discernible beginnings, though beginnings are merely necessary—not sufficient—to establish an event as an event. They also require discernible endings, which are forecast by clues, hints, tell-tale signs. Any event is a frame or form. Insofar as they begin and end, they are organized and designed. Thus, phones ringing, wind blowing, infants babbling, do exhibit closure. Once they begin we know they will end, and in the case of wind and infants "clues" are provided by crescendos and diminuendos. That our use of the terminology of music, an art, is applicable to a "natural" and non-art event blurs the difference Herrnstein-Smith wants to maintain between art and non-art in terms of closure. And we shall see that the phone ringing is an apt metaphor for the postmodern poetry Herrnstein-Smith notes as problematizing closure. The ringing of the phone—here, an example of non-art—will become the symbol of postmodern art in the last chapters of her study.

What Herrnstein-Smith wants to say in the above passage—and will say later and explicitly—is that closure entails the reader's anticipation of endings. But this clarification still will not suffice to draw a line that places closure on the side of art
events and end on the side of non-art events. As Herrnstein-Smith herself will acknowledge, it is not necessary that the wind actually stop blowing, that rain actually stop falling. Closure is psychological, anticipatory--it is what the reader expects to happen. And we all know of poems that we have heard or read that we expected to end--due to precisely the closural effects that Herrnstein-Smith will delineate throughout her study--but in fact continued on to sometimes "arbitrary" conclusions. Thus, to say that non-art events "stop" and art events "conclude" is to deny categorically and without support that non-art events can "conclude" and art events can "stop."

Perhaps because she too recognizes the poverty of this line of argument, Herrnstein-Smith says almost immediately afterwards that "Closure need not, however, be temporal; that is, it is not always a matter of endings." If closure is a psychological phenomenon, if it is the experiencing of an "entire poem," an entire form, it is clear then that closure is what goes on (or is experienced as going on) within beginning/endings, within forms. In effect, closure can go on indefinitely within a form or structure, which is why a structure or form that "appears closed" is experienced as closed because "it is experienced as integral: coherent, complete and stable." These are other names of certainty and presence. Closure, coherency, presence, certainty, integrity, completion, and stability name the same experience of the reader, an experience which is understood as an "entirety," a Gestalt, each time the reader chooses to read and re-read.

Clearly and quickly we find ourselves in the midst of what is recognizably reader-response theorizing:

It would seem that in the common land of ordinary events--where many experiences are fragmentary, interrupted, fortuitously connected, and determined by causes beyond our agency or comprehension--we create or seek out 'enclosures': structures that are highly organized, separated as if by an implicit frame from a background of relative disorder or randomness, and
integral and complete.\textsuperscript{54}

Is desire itself metaphysical to the extent it seeks out enclosures, presences, certainties, wholes? Or is there another desire, a desire for openness, absences, fragments, a desire promiscuous and adventuresome, a desire of indiscrimination without the psychological impetus of a subconscious search for the greatest Enclosure, Certainty, Presence, Whole? Is there, in short, a desire without theology and teleology, a difference between a desire-for-something and a desire-for-some-things? Or does the "for" itself name teleology and theology? If beginnings/ends, presences/absences--that is, form as both spatial and temporal--are required for closure and enclosure, we can perhaps discuss or conceive of a language only at arbitrary moments. Language then would remain unbounded or "open." If, for example, the words or syntax of a text are flagrantly ungrammatical and obscure--suggesting that it is ungrammaticality which imposes closure on language--then the more grammatical a poem is the more open it is (at least at the lexical level). This level directly affects the thematic level: the more ungrammatical the lexical level the more uncertain the thematic level.\textsuperscript{55} Both tend to drift away from what we tend to regard as the center: grammaticality. Thus all the elements Herrnstein-Smith will term "thematic features" of closure are subject to uncertainty when the lexical levels are ungrammatical. A poem thus characterized may be said to be "open" at both the formal (lexical) and thematic levels. It is thus possible for poems to be open at one level and closed at another or open at both levels or closed at both levels.

Despite her implicit recognition of the reader-response issues raised by her notion of closure, Herrnstein-Smith concerns herself, for the most part, with those textual features that orient reader response. Perhaps it is her fetishization of the text that lures her onto dangerous ground: a tendency to proffer a distinction between fictive and non-fictive discourse. This division serves as a way of separating the indetermination suggested by reader-response theory from what Herrnstein-Smith believes is the
comparative regularity and determination of the text. This regularity and determination is achieved by lifting fictive discourse above the currents of history:

Every utterance, in other words, occurs within a specific context of circumstances and motives. When a poem occurs, however, it is unmoored form such a context, isolated from the circumstances and motives that might have occasioned it.

This distinction between the ordinary "utterance" and the "poem" depends on the presence of the one who listens, hears and speaks. The absence of the author leads Herrnstein-Smith to posit the absence of circumstance and motive as far as the reader knows. But simply because an "utterance" occurs "within a specific context of circumstances and motives" this does not mean the present listener knows what these are. And the absence of the author--the absence of circumstance and motive--does not preclude the possibility of the reader determining by other means the circumstances and motives that occasioned the poem.

For example, when we read a so-called non-fictive text (newspaper, history book, science text, etc.) are we "aware" of the "motives that might have occasioned it?" No. Not unless we believe what we read by comparison with other texts, which we must believe a priori, and so on. We never know for certain whether or not an utterance or poem is fictive or non-fictive. Herrnstein-Smith believes that a poem should be "unmoored from such a context" because we regard it as fictive discourse. The fictive/non-fictive distinction is further enhanced by the association of fictive utterances with possibility and non-fictive utterances with necessity:

Even when the poem is occasioned by the poet's actual experiences and is most nearly a transcription of his individual "voice," a remark, as a poem, is only a possible utterance, what the poet might say. Although the revelation and articulation of that possibility may be one source of the poet's most compelling claim on our interests and emotions, nevertheless the claim is not the same as
that made upon us by one who addresses us directly, his discourse directly shaped
by the pressures of an immediate or "historical" occasion. Both the poet, in
composing the poem, and we, in responding to it, are aware of the distinction, and
it controls both the form of his discourse and the nature of our response. ⁵⁷
For Herrnstein-Smith the poem mimics both its possibility and its realization:
Language, in poetry, is used mimetically. It is used, moreover, in a
characteristic mimetic manner to suggest as vividly as possible (or necessary)
that very historical context which it does not, in fact possess. That is, the poem
represents not merely the words of an utterance, but a total act of speech. ⁵⁸
Herrnstein-Smith attempts to keep apart poetry and non-poetry, fictive and non-
fictive discourse, by appealing also to the conventions of meter. But what she does not
make explicit is that meter "frames" poetry and dissociates it from mere utterance only
because of our tradition that associates meter with poetry. At the same time, she
concedes historicity for the determination of what constitutes poetry in a section entitled
"Style and Convention" where "our expectations regarding any particular poem will be at
least partly determined by our previous experience with poetry--poetry in general,
poetry of that period or style, and the poetry of that writer." ⁵⁹ Yet history is nearly
jettisoned when Herrnstein-Smith argues that "what makes poems more like other
poems than like other forms of discourse are those characteristics which we call poetic
conventions. These characteristics are, however, ultimately derived from the formal
and thematic elements of discursive language. . . ." ⁶⁰ Elements which, I add, are
grounded in history.
If Herrnstein-Smith appears to subordinate or dismiss the significance of those
determinants of poetic conventions that are inescapably bound to social and cultural life,
she never strays far from her original notion of what closure ultimately means:
"Closure occurs when the concluding portion of a poem creates in the reader a sense of
appropriate cessation." ⁶¹ This formulation supports Herrnstein-Smith's opening
definition of closure as the reader's experience of the structure of the entire poem. The notion that closure occurs at the end remains dependent upon the whole experience of the whole structure, itself determined by conventions. As I noted above, closure is first and foremost a psychological experience determined by intertextual and intratextual conventions and expectations. For Herrnstein-Smith, the fulfillment of closure is dependent on both formal elements in the text and the reader's expectation which are determined by training. One must be trained (formally or informally, academically and by way of socialization) to experience closure. Closure is learned. Since closure is dependent upon experience, then all the various media geared toward an audience largely trained in public institutions teaches us to not only expect it but to also desire closure. As much as Herrnstein-Smith wishes to valorize the absolute autonomy of the poetic text, her acumen for precision forces her to take into account all the above factors, influences and determinations, and conclude that poetry reading, at least, is historical. What she leaves aside—in safekeeping as it were—is the poetry text as always historical: historicized and historicizing: "Each reading is, in a sense, a new and unique experience, the quality of which continues to depend as much upon the relation of the poem's structure to all our experiences as upon our previous experience with that poem or others like it in form." The absolute autonomy of the poetic text can be maintained as long as one never considers problems of translation, transcription, textual errors, the context of the poem's production, etc. Herrnstein-Smith's fetishizing of the text is perfectly consistent with the New Critical tradition in which she writes.

Because Herrnstein-Smith considers meter--among other poetic devices--essential to the demarcation of poetry from non-poetry, her discussion of free verse and postmodern poetry in general betrays her uncertainty and hesitations and forces revisions of credos upheld in the first half of her study. For the subversion of metricality threatens not only the possibility of closure but also the boundaries between the poetic and non-poetic. Herrnstein-Smith is aware of the threat to closure but seems
oblivious to the threat to poetry:

My point here has been that insofar as the formal structure of free verse is comparable to that of metrical poetry the closural resources of form may be effectively exploited by free verse poets. As one moves from more to less determined forms, however, closural effects become increasingly dependent upon thematic structure and special nonstructural devices. . . . While our expectations, in a free verse poem, are controlled by probabilities and confined by limits of occurrence of formal elements with the same degree of confidence as in fixed forms. Consequently, the closural effects that can arise from modification of formal structures do indeed remain minimal in free verse.63

What if, however, we come face-to-face with a poetry that not only contains a minimum of predictable formal elements but also contains thematic elements so "new" or unconventional that no predictions based on expectations are possible? How can closure in such a poetry remain even minimal? If Herrnstein-Smith can already see an open poetry hovering above the horizon of free verse, a poetry that escapes in toto her concept of closure, is her modification of the definition of closure a way to circumvent or forestall the advent of such a poetry?

What is important for our present concern [sequential structure and closure], then, is the fact that effective closure will always involve the reader's expectations regarding the termination of a sequence—even though it will never be simply a matter of fulfilling them. . . . Thus, although an indefinitely extendable series (such as first-second-third . . . , etc.) will determine the sequence of lines or stanzas, the conclusion will be determined by some other structural principle or, lacking any other principles, will be given stability and finality by special terminal features.64

Convention as fixed form can provoke the anticipation of closure even if the structure is open-ended, "indefinitely extendable," since closure remains a psychological
phenomenon. And if, for Herrnstein-Smith, closure is psychological, it finds its way to
the psyche by way of the ear canal. Closure is the psychological experience of speech:

My point here has been that since a lyric is the representation of an utterance the
meanings and motives suggested by a particular logical or syntactic sequence will
be qualified by numerous other elements in a poem--including, of course, 
metaphor--and that closure will always be experienced in relation to the total
act of speech thus represented and the particular context thus implied.65

The "total act of speech thus represented" suggests not only the entirety of the poem--
consistent with Herrnstein-Smith's earlier definitions of the prerequisites for closure--
but also the reproduction of all the speech-elements in an utterance in writing. But
speech is no more reducible to writing than writing is to speech. For although certain
elements of speech and writing admit of commutation with fidelity (for example, a rise
in pitch at the end of a sentence is equivalent, more or less, to the question mark), not
all writing is translatable into speech (how is the difference, for example, between a
colon and dash articulated?), nor is all speech translatable into writing (can italics and
exclamation points alone differentiate and transmit anger, excitement, lust, etc.?).
Herrnstein-Smith's concept of closure is inextricably tied to the "total act of speech,"
not the "total act of speech thus represented."

"Second, a poem is experienced via printed text, and no matter how weak the forces of
closure, the single fact that its last line is followed by an expanse of blank paper will
inform the reader that it is concluded."66 On the one hand, this statement supports my
contention that the psychology of closure must always be judged by the form of a hearing.
On the other hand, the statement is vacuous since (1) who has not read a page-long poem
that one did not know concluded until one had turned the page, and (2) the point is
superfluous anyway since the significance of Herrnstein-Smith's concept of closure
depends not on whether a reader knows when a poem concludes but when the reader
believes it will conclude--a belief stimulated by the closural features she delineates--
regardless of whether the poem in fact continues or ceases.

All these concerns depend on the relation between "voicing" words and so-called "silent" reading. But in either case, speaking or reading, utterance or its representation, it is the reader/listener who experiences closure. This suggests that it is possible for readers to fail to experience closure even if the poem has apparently sufficient closural features. And even when it is experienced, closure varies in degree from reader to reader and from reading to reading: "Closure is, of course, a relative matter. A poem may be gently though firmly closed, or slammed shut, locked and bolted." And yet, though a poet may attempt to close a poem gently and firmly, the reader may nonetheless experience it as having been slammed shut. Herrnstein-Smith's formal analysis cries out here for either (or both) a historicist and/or psychoanalytical theory of the machinery of closure. The absence of both is all the more bewildering given Herrnstein-Smith's constant references to the role of the reader. Perhaps her reader is too idealized since she tends to locate psychological elements in the text:

As the preceding chapters have suggested, the condition for maximal closure will arise when the structural principles in a poem predetermine its conclusion most rigourously and when the greatest number or concentration of certain features appear in its terminal lines. In such a poem, every element would be designed to set up or secure the conclusiveness of its conclusion. It would be a pre-eminently teleological poem and in a sense a suicidal one, for all its energy would be directed toward its own termination.

If the poem's death drive is an inescapable feature of its existence, of that which is, paradoxically, so compellingly vital and productive, perhaps we can understand from a new perspective Olson's desire for open forms, for the line of breath, the reintegration of the body into writing, as symptoms of a desire to say a poem that lives. Perhaps for Olson the open poem would in principle need never end or close or stop; it would be a poem that celebrates not (just) life but immortality, a non suicidal but fantasizing poem
nonetheless. By situating the Olsonian hierarchy of open and closed forms in this way, I underline the utopian dimension of postmodernist tenets of openness that are derived from Olson. This repositioning of Olson's thought is valid to the extent it accounts for the familiar and neat divisions between modernism and postmodernism whether they are viewed as historical categories or aesthetic ones: conservative/liberal, traditional/experimental, pessimistic/optimistic, etc. This schema conveniently neglects "open" modernist poems and "closed" postmodernist ones, revolutionary modernist poems and conservative postmodernist ones, etc. And because quite often the same work of art is analyzed and documented as both "open" and "closed" by opposing camps the essentialism of openness and closure is again called into question.

• • •

First, a failure of closure is not always a local defect, confined to the conclusion of a poem. If the total design is ill-wrought, incoherent or self-divided, closure may not only be inadequate but impossible. Some of the glorious fragments that strew the landscape of nineteenth-century poems—Keats' *Fall of Hyperion*, for example—in all likelihood could not have been, given their present form, finished at all.69

For Herrnstein-Smith the inability or unwillingness to achieve closure is a "failure," even if it is not a "local defect," but one that is spread throughout a poem like a contagion. The "failure of closure" is a symptom of incompetence or self-delusion. But the consequences of her failure to historicize reading may be read in her statement that a poem like *Fall of Hyperion* "could not have been . . . finished" given its "present form."

Perhaps the poem can be read as finished only from a nineteenth century perspective. Or a twentieth century perspective different from Herrnstein-Smith's.

But as Herrnstein-Smith proceeds in her analysis and considers the relation between closure and climax, she finds herself unable to avoid historicizing closure. Although she has already announced that she will not do a historical survey of the concepts of closure,
she nevertheless cannot avoid, however obliquely, the historicizing force of closure:

Since the term "anti-climax" is frequently used to signify or describe the effect of closural inadequacy, we might give it some attention here. In the broadest terms, a climax is the "highest" point of an "ascending" series. I have enclosed these two words in quotation marks because they are really figurative, but figurative in an irreducible way. That is, they cannot be translated into anything more literal or objective: each is a metaphor for a quality shared by our responses to many different kinds of phenomena, but the quality cannot be specified without the metaphor. In any case (whether it is a matter of voice, number, rapidity or whatever), when events occurring in temporal succession are also related to each other in such a way as to suggest a scale, the event that defines the uppermost limit of that scale will be continuously and increasingly expected and, when it occurs, will be experienced as climactic. It will provide the expected limit and thus release the tension that accompanied its expectations, especially with regard to sequential series, will suggest how significant this is for closure. We may ask, however, whether the occurrence of any climax in a poem (or a play or novel) is necessarily equivalent to successful closure at the point: and I think that, again, much of what we have observed in the preceding chapters will suggest why it is not.70

(1) It may be that this "scale" is itself only the measure of value, that is, the hierarchizing of our responses, to certain stimuli. Thus, like closure, climax is a psychological experience determined by the contingencies of history. It may be that the tending "upwards," the accumulation and sedimentation of "expectations" so necessary for climax, reflects the theological impulse that permeates the history of man, that, indeed, determines the event called "man." If expectations can be schematized in the model of a scale, increases in "force, number, rapidity or whatever" are experienced as gradually climbing because they reflect some primordial religious experience: the
moment man looks up and gazes upon the vastness of a universe he does not understand.

In short, at the moment man perceives he is a descendant of something other than himself—animals or gods, humanisms or theisms—the theological impulse is already in place.

(2) If these "expectations" are necessary but not sufficient for closure, this is so because both partake of the qualities of unity and coherence. Climax depends on a unified series, a coherent structure, just as much as closure does, but whereas climax requires only a sequential series, Herrnstein-Smith's discussion of other closural techniques (associative, thematic, metrical, etc.) suggests that more than one closural element is necessary for "successful closure." This is why poetry that depends less on associative, thematic, sequential, etc. techniques is judged by Herrnstein-Smith as examples of incoherent, self-divided, ill-wrought poems. What began as a descriptive study becomes a prescriptive essay. Herrnstein-Smith comes to see this herself:

Thus, (although it was not my intention), the preponderance of examples drawn from sixteenth-and seventeenth-century poetry might have suggested that Renaissance closure is (or was being considered) normative, while the discussions of associative structure and free verse were obviously tending towards structure and free verse were obviously tending towards generalizations about closure in Romantic and post-Romantic poetry. If we add that epigrammatic closure, in both its techniques and its expressive effects, would naturally be associated with neoclassical verse, we can see what those broad outlines might come to: closure in Renaissance poetry tended to be strong and secure, in Augustan poetry to be maximal, in Romantic poetry to be weak, and in modern poetry it has become minimal. This formulation is neat, but the moment we have thus explicitly constructed it, we know it must crumble under the weight of all the exceptions and qualifications we should have to add.71

At the formal level at least, it seems true enough that exceptions exist between poems of an epoch, but also—and this is my central point—there are strategies within poems at,
for example, the thematic level, that habitually exclude and include certain themes, making for the indetermination of openness and closedness. It might appear abusive to shift from formal issues to thematic issues in a poem, especially if those thematic issues are characteristic of that period—in short, to talk as Herrnstein-Smith does about the general and relative openness and/or closedness of Romantic or Renaissance poetry—but this shifting is perhaps abusive only at the formal level (though a case could be made, I think, for formal characteristics peculiar to each era). At the thematic level there are general concerns of Renaissance poetry that are not the general concerns of Romantic poetry. And there are thematic concerns excluded a priori. Of course I am here accepting the historical categories Romantic and Renaissance for heuristic purposes (they no more designate historical periods than modernism and postmodernism).

Bounded by history, these categories are "closed." They are thus subject to serialization by Herrnstein-Smith. And while she recognizes the flaw of tagging these periods in terms of diminishing closure, it is only because there are exceptions in each period. There is no indication that for her periodization is provisional. She seems to accept it as a "truth." Nor does her concept of closure undergo scrutiny. But for me not only is it a matter of what one considers open and closed, it is also a matter of the criteria that constitutes the categories closure and openness. Having conceded that she has regarded the closure of Renaissance poetry as her norm, Herrnstein-Smith will not so much surrender the idea of a norm as she will attempt to justify it by levelling out her periods of closure—Renaissance, Romantic, Modern—so that instead of a decrease of closural effects from period to period there is an increase in the strategies used to try to escape what is inescapable: closure. Closure then will remain the normative effect of all poetry between the Renaissance and Modern period:

Although free verse, imagism, symbolism, and other stylistic developments have made their mark, none of them has created a break between non-objective and representational painting, or between atonal and traditional music . . . The point
to be emphasized is that a large and entirely respectable part of contemporary
poetry is simply indistinguishable from traditional poetry in the ways that would
affect closure...\textsuperscript{72}

Herrnstein-Smith’s belief in periodization can be inferred by her recognition of the
fact that the “Modern” period lacks any positive attributes that might serve as its
categorization; it can only be named by what it does not do:

The term “modern poetry” is a literary historian’s nightmare, not only because
dates always imply definitions (and vice versa), but because the most striking
characteristic of the poetry of our time is its stylistic multiplicity. Not only are
the forms widely various, but also the moods and mannerisms, the implied
aesthetics, and the allegiances—or what we should ordinarily call the
“traditions.” The latter term is almost one, when almost every poetic tradition
that has ever existed—native or foreign, Western or Oriental, classical or
medieval—is to some extent viable, and the most characteristic feature of our
poetic activity, broadly considered, is the apparent absence of any principle of
rejection.\textsuperscript{73}

Herrnstein-Smith’s depiction of our present-day Babel of poetry is accurate, but her
puzzlement results from her failure to analyze the cultural landscape from the point of
view of a political economy. For example, Herrnstein-Smith fails to explicitly connect
our “stylistic multiplicity” to the acceleration of industrial development that afforded
the creation of a luxury middle-class that consumes and produces an enormous amount of
art, including poetry. Moreover the effects have spread down and up. No class by virtue
of being that class is excluded from reading and writing poetry. The publishing and
distribution of poetry, however, is predominantly a middle-class adventure. It is an
expensive enterprise—despite the advent of personal computers and desktop publishing—
for those whose incomes dip near or below the low-middle-class income average. It is
only at the levels above that the establishment—by which I mean the publication and
distribution of canons, of traditions—is implemented. If then "the most striking characteristic of our time is its stylistic multiplicity," this is not because we live during the only epoch characterized by "stylistic multiplicity." If we today recognize this plurality of styles, if it is visible in our bookstores and libraries, it is because pluralism, as the visible proliferation of ideas, is the sine qua non of middle-class liberalism and conservatism. Surely no one believes that the half-dozen or so Romantic poets generally studied in the academy and emblazoned across the media in cliches and stereotypes are the sole poets, or even the representative poets, of Europe during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. When Herrnstein-Smith states that the term "tradition" is "almost meaningless... in an era such as the present one, when almost every poetic tradition that has ever existed... is to some extent viable..." it is clear that her concept of tradition is that of the conventional New Critic: monolithic, homogenous and Darwinian (as progress or decline). At the same time, Herrnstein-Smith is correct that the traditions currently developing or being revitalized do so "to some extent." For there are poets that will never be published, distributed and read on a scale beyond the parochial. The commercial and university presses have no interest in their work.

Herrnstein-Smith may be right that our poetry, "broadly considered," is all-inclusive, but the guiding principle among many diverse interests is precisely the extent to which they define themselves by rejecting out of hand alternative possibilities of writing and reading poetry. For these movements, rejection is part and parcel of the construction of identity: personal, cultural, political, philosophical, etc. Rejection is the principle of both closure and closed poetry, reader and text. In a certain sense there can never be a poetry indiscriminately open, for the marking of words onto paper or uttering words into air indicates a choices, a selection, a road taken and a road not taken. Closed poems and closure require an outside from which to differ, by which to enclose and close.
Now if openness and closure are dependent on what one means by these terms, then the very nature of poetry is threatened. Are "found" poems really poems? Notice that my use of the adverbial form of "real" already betrays an essentialistic notion of poetry. This is why these notions that have concerned me are both trivial and significant: trivial because ultimately the determination of openness and closure is subject to other factors and, in a sense, name these other factors; but significant because the debate concerns ultimately the status of the literary object itself. Does this object qua object still "exist" when the rules of the game have not only been altered but thrown out?

As we observed in Chapter 1, one of the functions or affects of poetic form is to "frame" the poetic utterance: to maintain its identity as distinct from that of ordinary discourse, to draw an enclosing line, in other words, that marks the boundary between "art" and "reality." Now, it is clear that to the extent that the propriety of that boundary line itself is questioned, so also will be the propriety of its closural effects. What one may think of here as certain current (though by no means exclusively modern) conceptions of poetry and art that value the "natural" or the illusion of naturalness while disdaining the artful, the obviously conventional or artificial. Anti-closure in modern poetry, then, may be referred to some extent to this effort toward poetic realism, where structure or other features that mark the work as a verbal artifact--rather than a direct transcription of personal utterance--are avoided.74

Herrnstein-Smith discovers the direct opposition of the "personal utterance" to those "features that mark the work as verbal artifact" in one of its forms as anti-closural. Poetic "realism" plays directly into the hands of ideology insofar as it pretends to be a "direct transcription" of the "personal utterance" which is assumed to be "natural," that is, void of closural effects. But what gives "personal utterance" its utter predictability, its stereotypical quality, is that nothing is more conventional and closural than "personal utterance." What is presumed to be "real" is exactly what I term ideology, not
because underneath the infrastructures of capitalist alienation lurks the "real" relation of man to nature and to himself, but because the real itself is only and always a product of ideology. There is no escape from ideology in this sense because there is no escape--least of all in language--from some form of closure. And because language is the name par excellence of forms, it is little wonder that Herrnstein-Smith links the tendency "toward poetic realism" to an 'age of suspicion," that is, a suspicion of the vagaries of language. The proliferation of tendencies toward "poetic realism," however, allows me to read the poetry scene other than I have described it thus far. In brief, then, the multiplicity of strategies and forms demonstrate that no matter how much one mimics what one believes is the "real," one never escapes form to embrace that "real" in its immediacy. The poetry of realism drips with unintentional irony in the posture it adopts toward the academy and the real. Its flight from the "belated" academy never leads it to the presence of that which the academy supposedly "only" represents. Predictably enough, one notes the proliferation of more academies, more bureaucracies, more conventions, across the literary landscape however much they lack "legitimation."

Of course, it is possible to read academic poetry in just the opposite manner: it calls attention to its artificiality as a way of glossing "realism" as yet another "artifact" that has been "naturalized" by custom and habit. The insistence on a "real" beneath bourgeois artificiality animates Marxists and Modernists. This is why both eschew "social realism" because of its tendency to reify ideology. Instead, both propose a poetry that is visionary (and the religious resonances are applicable to both), imaginary, and, above all else, formalistic.75
NOTES


2 Olson 147. The caricaturing of the self of contemporary neoromantic poetry as the "private soul-at-any-public wall" continues today in the polemics of language writers who often cite Olson as a primary if problematic precursor.

3 Olson 147.

4 Olson 147.


6 I am indebted here to the lectures of Kofi Natambu, "Jazz and Contemporary Writing," Detroit Institute of Arts, September-November 1986.

7 Olson 156. Eliot's essay is conspicuous by its absence as a reference for the language writers that cite Olson as a precursor. The de-emphasis on both the left and right of literary politics points to the common desire to valorize community over individuality, however different the communities envisioned.

8 The effect of developments in the sciences this century--for example Godel's undecideable factor and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle--has been to undermine the widely held belief--both within and outside the sciences--that science has direct access to the "essence" of things, the "real." This is hardly the "end" of science. It does mean that scientists are now forced to weigh and factor in the effects of their methods and instruments in their research inasmuch as the "object" of science now includes the scientist, his apparatus, his methodology and, of course, the thing or event under observation.

9 Olson 148.

10 Olson 148.

11 Olson 148.

12 Olson 148-49.

13 Semantics is a notoriously difficult subject for linguists because it does not easily lend itself to synchronic formalism.

14 Olson 148.
That is, whether one subscribes to a Freudian or Lacanian interpretation of psychological "forces."

I imagine that such a reconciliation would have to be post-Freud and post-Marx, whatever that might actually mean. For example, while it might be relatively easy to view the anti-oedipal pro-schizophrenic analyses of Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze as "post"-Freud in both the historical and developmental sense, I'm not so certain one can call their anarchist posture "post"-Marx except in only a historical sense. And this
doesn't even begin to address the problem of "developmental," i.e., its underlying teleology.

*36* Eco 49.

*37* Eco 51.

*38* Eco 63.

*39* This cryptic sentence alludes to Nicolas Abraham's "The Shell and the Kernel," *Diacritics* 9 (1979): 16-31. In question for me is the ethico-political desire that sets into motion the concepts of openness and closure. The allusion to this work of the late analyst is meant to suggest that this desire has its source in a more fundamental need: the validation of life "itself." This issue is raised at the conclusion of chapter four.

*40* Hult iv.

*41* Hult iv.

*42* Hult iv.


*44* Craig 69.

*45* Craig 144.

*46* That is, I wish to use these concepts as heuristic devices in the manner, say, of Nietzsche, as opposed to the synthesizing logic of Hegel.

*47* Craig 151.

*48* I might also have added Joyce's notion of waking up from the nightmare of history. The young artist can do so only when he leaves his homeland in fact or imagines himself elsewhere (i.e., begins to write). This is a romantic and modernist creed which links all the works of Nietzsche, Joyce, and Barthes.


*50* Herrnstein-Smith viii.

*51* Herrnstein-Smith 2.

*52* Herrnstein-Smith 2.

*53* Herrnstein-Smith 2.

*54* Herrnstein-Smith 2.
I use the term "ungrammatical" in the sense meant by Michael Riffaterre in his Semiotics of Poetry (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978) en passim. I should stress that for Riffaterre ungrammaticality tends to ensure certainty of meaning and interpretation because it initiates what he calls "semiosis." I believe Riffaterre is correct to the extent one accepts his notion of the poem as bounded by a "finite context." I don't dispute the finitude of the context; I do dispute the certainty with which we may determine it.

This notion of the "real" as the covered-over permeates the thought of the last hundred years: think of Heidegger's Being revealed through concealment, Freud's id masked by the ego and superego, Marx's ideology as false consciousness, etc. In the next two chapters I show how the struggle for the "real" of literature is fought on the grounds of space and time in the theories of Joseph Frank and William V. Spanos.
CHAPTER THREE

Because of the language that we all use, our modest attempts at talking about the meaning of literary works often resort to the terminology of space and time. To the extent that it attempts to codify its observations and conclusions, literary criticism tends to go even further, relying predominantly on either spatial or temporal concepts. And the tendency to exclude either spatiality or temporality is even more evident in some forms of literary theory. That neither spatial nor temporal terms can be entirely excluded is not self-evident proof that these theories are flawed but fixable. Rather this "failure" points to a confusion in thinking about literature. We have no choice but to use spatial and temporal terms when we talk about literary form, but this is not at all the same thing as believing these terms are somehow "real," that literature is somehow just as we describe it. I contend that these terms have an important heuristic function, but I do not believe they describe literature "as such" because (1) most of the spatial and temporal terms employed for talking about literature depend on the mechanistic worldview of Newtonian science, and (2) the "as such" points to an ontology of literature prior to an epistemology of it. But that ontology can only be confirmed through an epistemology. Our terminology is metaphorical, necessary but insufficient.

In the next two chapters I shall examine the literary theories of Joseph Frank and William V. Spanos. Actually, Frank's major contribution, The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature, attempts to be literary criticism, a description of what Frank believes is the modernist impulse toward spatial form. But as I shall show, Frank's descriptions depend on prescriptive presuppositions, a theory, about what literature "really" is.

Because I regard spatiality and temporality as heuristic concepts for talking about literature I shall be using temporal concepts to critique Frank's notions of spatial form and spatial concepts to critique Spanos' notions of temporal form. As concerns the concepts of openness and closure, I hope to show that they revolve around questions of
form. Furthermore, I hope to show that these concerns—under other names—are also
Frank's concerns as I examine the relationship between his idealized "image" and
"whole" text. Finally, I justify using his work on both the modern novel and modern
poem on the basis that what Frank theorizes about the novel is applicable to poetry
insofar as he prescribes criteria for the novel in contrast to poetry. Thus, I dispute
some of his readings of modernist novels in order to show how those readings reflect his
theory about those works.

* * *

Part of Joseph Frank's project in *The Widening Gyre* is the rehabilitation of Gotthold
Lessing's infamous *Laocoon*. Lessing's essay is marked by its insistence on propriety in
all its forms. Not only does he insist upon art for art's sake, but he also puts forth the
thesis that the plastic and literary arts have their own binding properties which are,
respectively, spatial and temporal. Lessing's argument is directed at both artists and
critics; it wants to tell painters and poets how to create and it wants to tell critics how to
describe what the artists have created.²

Frank inherits this concern for propriety; it animates the literary theory embedded
in his literary criticism. Following Lessing, he argues that there are appropriate forms
for specific arts. According to Frank, Lessing believed that form "in the plastic arts" is
"necessarily spatial because the visible aspect of objects can best be presented
juxtaposed in an instant of time." To the instantaneously perceived plastic art form
Frank opposes literature: "Literature, on the other hand, makes use of language,
composed of a succession of words," which is why literature is "based primarily on some
form of narrative sequence."³ According to Frank, writers up to this century have more
or less tacitly respected Lessing's injunctions. Now, however, something new is
happening:

At the very outset, therefore, modern poetry advocates a poetic method in direct
contradiction to Lessing's analysts of language . . . For Eliot, the distinctive
quality of a poetic sensibility is its capacity to form new wholes, to fuse seemingly disparate experiences into an organic unity.⁴ This is still criticism inasmuch as Frank is describing what the modernist poets are doing and what one of them claims for his "poetic sensibility." But two pages later Frank adopts Eliot's modernist line:

In The Waste Land... syntactical sequence is given up for a structure depending on the perception of relationships between disconnected word-groups. To be properly understood, these word-groups must be juxtaposed with one another and perceived simultaneously. Only when this is done can they be adequately grasped; for, while they follow one another in time, their meaning does not depend on this temporal relationship.⁵

Everything that follows in this book on spatial form builds upon these few phrases. So I begin with Frank's uncritical acceptance of Lessing's distinction between the plastic and literary arts. Lessing and Frank assume that while the eye of the viewer/reader must move through a "succession of words," the eye apprehends the plastic art form in an "instant of time." But is it possible to perceive or apprehend a plastic art form without moving the pupils, however imperceptibly? Perception involves the coordination of the motion of the pupils. One no more perceives a painting's form than its elements are juxtaposed in an "instant of time." Timeless and eternal, the "instant" lies outside temporality just as myth transcends history.

Frank accepts Lessing's "instant of time" because it provides a way for him to understand the concept of meaning. Because meaning appears to elude spatial and temporal conceptualization, it has the same status within Frank's spatial form theory as the "instant of time." For Frank, meaning "happens" in an "instant of time." Although words may follow one another in "succession," "their meaning does not depend on this temporal relationship."

When meaning happens in its instant, form is apprehended, for "aesthetic form is not
an external arrangement provided by a set of traditional rules," but is instead "the revolution between the sensuous nature of the medium and the conditions of human perception." Moreover, forms arise "spontaneously from the organization of the artwork as it [presents] itself to perception." Here, form has the same status as "instant of time" and "meaning"; it arises between the medium and the perceiver. It, too, lies outside temporality, history and causality (it arises "spontaneously").

To the extent that it has become like paintings, the modernist poem recedes from history. But this disappearance is achieved only insofar as meaning is "adequately grasped" and "properly understood." If the modernist poem does retreat from history as Frank claims, he nonetheless draws boundaries between it and its readers: adequation and propriety. Since meaning (and form) lie outside history, they reside on the "other side" of propriety and adequation with the modernist poem. They are the property of the poem. So if it first appeared that Frank's relegation of the instant, meaning and form to the outside-of-history meant they occupied a "neutral" zone between the text and the reader, it is clear that this is not the case.

Specifically, Frank assumes that there is a central meaning intrinsic to the text of The Waste Land. This meaning is a juxtaposition of word-groups which are separated from one another by other word-groups. But what about these "other word-groups" that form a part of the "proper" meaning? They either supersaturate the central meaning (and are thus redundant or unsequential) or remain extraneous to adequation and thus "useless" waste products. This is perfectly conceivable since no writer's text is homogenous and unified. But what if narrative sequence was the intention of Eliot despite his paratactic word-groups? What if it is possible to derive a number of meanings that never coalesce into something called a "central theme?" So long as the notions of propriety and adequation rule Frank's reading he cannot see this possibility.

For Frank, ordinary narrative sequence of word-groups implies their "instinctive and immediate reference" to "the objects or events they symbolize" as well as the "the
constitution of meaning from the sequence of those references.” As the linear movement from word-group to word-group, ordinary narrative sequence erases itself. What becomes important is not the relationship of one word-group to another word-group, but the relationship of word-groups to the "objects or events they symbolize." What is implied by this formulation is that it is the apparent naturalness of linear reading that castrates the intra-relationship of words. Modern poetry "focuses on a space-logic" that frustrates the facile movement of castration by the reader by forcing him or her to respect the integrity of the word itself, and, in effect, save word from reference. If the modernist poem appears fragmented to us due to collages, cut-ups and parataxis, it is because castration has taken place here also. To put it into Barthesian terms, the readerly text is castrating and castrated because it encourages an uncritical sequential reading that erases or obfuscates the word as word or the word-group as word-group. The word is castrated from itself by way of the castrating sequential reading. The writerly text, on the other hand, is also castrating and castrated to the extent that while it re-marries word with word, it also divorces the word from the objects and events to which it would otherwise refer.

That neither of these castrating operations is entirely successful should make us wary of the critique of linear reading from whatever quarters it comes. I do not believe the necessity of Frank's conclusion: "modern poetry forces its readers to suspend the process of individual reference temporarily until the entire pattern of internal references can be apprehended as a unity." Aside from what I have said already about the problem of any totalizing reading of any text, readerly or writerly, I might also note how in this concept of "unity" the writerly returns to the readerly. Frank implies that while the creative act of composition can be either readerly or writerly, the critical act of interpretation must be readerly, i.e., totalizing. What Frank (and, here, Barthes, Derrida et al) does not say is that it is always possible to read the readerly in a writerly fashion. It is always possible to deliberately suspend the castrating lure of ordinary
narrative sequence in order to attend to the word as word. This procedure is what we
know as "critical analysis." Likewise, though perhaps more difficult, it is always
possible to read sequentially through apparent non sequiturs, paratactic word-groups,
etc., and re-integrate them with the objects and events to which they refer. Such a
"literal" --as opposed to analytical--reading will no doubt appear less critical because
of our historical moment that until the advent of modernism dealt with readerly texts.
Faced today with a text already divided and castrated from objects and events, we do in
fact re-integrate, read in a readerly fashion. But as I explained above, this procedure
flirts with a totalization of the text, risks returning it to the safeguard of the readerly.
Only by restricting oneself to word-groups or words and reading them "as if" they were
isolated in fact can one avoid returning to the readerly. But this latter procedure has its
own risks: readings that are merely impressionistic.

I abandon here the writerly, readerly, castrating, and so on. I hope I've shown,
however insistently, the phallocentric link between the work of someone like Frank and
people like Barthes and Derrida: a tendency to regard these concepts and terms as fixed
categories into which writers and readers may be placed. I mean no mystification when I
suggest that literature and readers elude the tendency to turn heuristic devices into steel
cages. Literature and readers are no more reducible to psychoanalytic categories than
they are to spatial or temporal metaphors.

* * *

As long as the reader's desire (a desire for reading more complex than simply
readerly and writerly, castrating or disseminating) is not taken into consideration, it is
always possible to talk about language in spatial and/or temporal terms. As I've argued
thus far, language is not reducible to either category, separately or together (e.g., spatio-
temporal). Insofar as Frank sees language--like Lessing--as essentially temporal
despite the modernist attempt to display its spatiality, Frank's assessment of the legacy
of modernism is predictable: "If pursued with Mallarmé's relentless, it [the "ambition
of modern poetry" to dislocate the "temporality of language"] culminates in the self-negation of language and the creation of a hybrid pictographic 'poem' that can only be considered a fascinating historical curiosity."\(^{10}\)

For example, in Frank's commentary on Flaubert, simultaneity is the "instant of time" at which temporality ceases to exist, the "point" at which point, moment and instant interfuse:

For a study of aesthetic form in the modern novel, Flaubert's famous country fair scene in *Madame Bovary* is a convenient point of departure. . . . As Flaubert sets the scene, there is action going on simultaneously at three levels. . . . Albert Thibaudet has compared this scene to the medieval mystery play, in which various related actions occur simultaneously on different stage levels, but this acute comparison refers to Flaubert's intention rather than to his method. *'Everything should sound simultaneously.'* Flaubert later wrote, in commenting on this scene . . . but since language proceeds in time, it is impossible to approach simultaneity of perception except by breaking up temporal sequence. And this is exactly what Flaubert does. . . . For the duration of the scene, at least, the time-flow of the narrative is halted; attention is fixed on the interplay of relationships within the immobilized time-area. These relationships are juxtaposed independently of the progress of the narrative. . . .\(^{11}\)

I have quoted judiciously from Frank's essay to show the turns of his thought, how the "approach to simultaneity" gives way to its what Frank believes is its actual achievement when the "time-flow of the narrative is halted" and the reader contemplates "the interplay of relationships within the immobilized time-area." And as the interplay of relationships enacts simultaneity "outside" the "time-flow of the narrative," so meaning and form--as we have seen--occur as a whole, "the totality of each level taken as in integer."\(^ {12}\)

Now if language is neither spatial nor temporal, it is also neither simultaneity or a
point. It is easy to turn from this cul-de-sac to idealism. It is also easy to recognize in this limit the horizon of what and how we know. From *Finnegan's Wake* to post-wave avant-gardists The Swans, from Eric Staie to 2-Live Crew, from John Cage to Kathy Acker, twentieth century artists call into question concepts of randomness, voice, order, and information. But all this would be literally meaningless were there not also new thinkers in the audience, new listeners, readers and viewers who, contrary to Frank, have no need to, say, read *Ulysses* by "continually fitting fragments together and keeping allusions in mind" to "link them to their complements." These new consumers revel in the experiences afforded by disorder and fragmentation.

Frank's concept of spatial form depends on a prior concept of temporal form. This is why Frank approves of Lessing's contention that language is essentially temporal. But I contend that form is only experienced spatially. Time in Proust, for example, is always experienced as visible and spatial. But if the "passage of time" in Proust is only knowable when it is experienced, then time is not verifiable outside human experience. Once again the possibility of an engagement with an ontology not mediated by an epistemology disappears. Frank writes, "To experience the passage of time, Proust had learned, it was necessary to rise about it and to grasp both past and 'pure time.' But 'pure time,' obviously, is not time at all--it is perception in a moment of time, that is to say, space." But if "a moment of time, that is to say, space" is then a moment of space, the other name for moment of space is the point. And the point is to space what the moment is to time: that which lies beyond or outside space and time. The point is pure space, that is, not space at all.

Frank privileges space only when he refuses admission to that which cannot be ordered, totaled and unified. Spatiality implies difference, but form implies identity. Form arises by enclosing and excluding. But within an enclosure there may yet be an opening. This is why closed forms of poetry can be open and open forms of poetry can be
closed. But when Frank turns to Djuna Barnes' *Ryder*, he reads it as "an anomalous creation from any point of view." a "kaleidoscope of moods and styles" "in the service of literary jeu d'esprit." Frank's inability to reduce the novels' "moods and styles" to the "comprehensible pattern" for which *Nightwood* is lauded blinds him to the suggestiveness of his own metaphor: kaleidoscopes are forms that contain difference and openness within them. But Frank fails to see this because he conceives of form as homogenous and totalizing.

Frank castigates those who read *Nightwood* "simply as a stylistic phenomena," a "collection of striking passages, some of breathtaking quality," because such readings will never be "conducive to intelligent appreciation or understanding" until they read *Nightwood* as first and foremost "a work of art." We understand works because they are finished and complete. To revere the "striking passages" in *Nightwood* is not to "understand" the "work of art," the whole thing, the whole form. And if it is possible to intelligently understand "striking passages" that are "only" word-groups, forms themselves, then the question of reading *Nightwood* becomes not a context between parts and wholes, fragments and completions, but a struggle between forms and Form. Frank assumes that these forms themselves can never help us understand the Form unless we yoke together all the forms into Form--"the work of art"--itself.

Frank's valorization of Form requires the subjugation of both the forms within the Form and those forms outside the Form: e.g., readers. But if the modernist elevates his Form into the instant of meaning outside history, he also leaves open the question of intentionally since what he intends resides with him in history. Reading the work of art that has been left without intention, the reader chooses to decide, based on his reading, what was the intended meaning. But Frank never takes into account the reader's choice in these matters. Instead he decides to read the modernist text with the tenets of modernism:

But so precisely do the images in this passage apply to everything the reader has learned about Saint-Loup, so exactly do they communicate the central impression
of his personality, that it would be possible to derive a total knowledge of his
color character solely from the images without attaching them to a set of external social
and historical details.\(^18\)

But of course one could only know one had accumulated all the knowledge concerning Saint-
Loup, even if one excludes so-called "external social and historical details" (and it is not
clear that one could do this or why one should do this), only if one knew in advance what
Saint-Loup's character in its totality "is" or would "be." How could one know that one
had taken into account all the images (metaphors, symbols, etc.) that were pertinent to
the character?

The impossibility of this knowledge always confines one to the forms within the Form.
Frank, too, will valorize the forms--that is, the word-groups, the images. The image is
the name of the form in the Form. Because of the image's etymological and historical
kinship to the pictorial arts, it becomes for Frank an excellent example of the
spatializing tendencies of modernism. But at the same time the "series of images"
threatens to undermine the spatial form of the Form. Thus certain images will be
elevated to the plane of the significant while others will remain mere images, "a
collection of striking passages." The difference between these two types of images is that
the significant images will always be attached to a third type of form: a person, place or
thing. These forms are arranged in a hierarchy, their importance determined by the
extent to which they subsume other forms, or to put it another way, the extent to which
less significant forms congregate around them. When Frank writes, "The dramatic poet .
. . defined both physical and psychological aspects of character at one stroke, in an image
or as series of images," character is here the form around which other forms--images--
collect. The more images that are attached to that character the more important the
character.\(^19\)

Frank claims that "images and symbols . . . must be referred to each other spatially
throughout the time-act of reading." Why not temporally? Is it because the "time-act of
reading" is irreversible while referral through space is reversible? But insofar as these "images and symbols" are accumulated by the reader only during reading--which is irreversible--it seems clear that referral is also irreversible, hence temporal, hence not spatial.\(^{20}\) The possibility of reversal implicit in referral spatially has a crucial function for Frank. It is essential to the constitution of character, for while a character may appear in a novel at specific places, it is probable that some of the images that attach themselves to the character will appear between and even after the last appearance of the character. For Frank, referral must be spatial and reversible so he can account for the concept of characterization. Otherwise character dissolves under the proliferation of mere images, mere "striking passages." Thus in the context of *Nightwood*, it is character, and not language, that is valorized by Frank:

> At first sight Dr. O'Connor's brilliant and fantastic monologues seem to dominate the book . . . but the central figure--the figure around whom the situation revolves--is in reality Robin Vote . . . From these descriptions we begin to realize that Robin symbolizes a state of existence which is before, rather than beyond, good and evil. She is both innocent and depraved--meet of child and desperado--precisely because she has not reached the human state where moral values become relevant.\(^{21}\)

The centralization of Robin Vote not only continues the modernist program to seek a center where things hold, but also goes hand-in-hand with the centrality of the image per se. The character is a replica of the image--recall its pictorial association--while monologues cannot be pictorialized since they proceed through time. The opposition of character and monologue replicates and depends on the prior opposition of painting's spatiality and language's temporality.

Though Robin Vote is, for Frank, the central character, form and image, her lack of "moral values," her pre-humanness, threatens Frank's idealization of her central form. The recasting of Robin Vote as the human-pre-human elicits what Frank means to be
paradoxical—as opposed to contradictory—assessments of her character. Thus, "Robin is at once completely egotistical yet lacking in a sense of her own identity." Insofar as this statement collapses Frank's assessment of Robin with her inability to assess herself, it is patently anthropomorphic since Frank has just stated that she "has not reached the human state where moral values become relevant." Whether "egotistical" is descriptive or prescriptive, it imparts to Robin a moral stigma that she should not suffer. The significance of this marking becomes apparent, however, when we read Frank's discussion of Robin's amoral and "amorphous" constitution. Frank's anthropomorphism is provoked by the threat posed by her amorality and thus, for Frank, her ahumannity. This ahumannity cannot be captured in any kind of frame. It suffuses Nightwood, it spreads throughout the text and (dis-)colors everything and everyone associated with Robin Vote. Vote's ahumannity takes on the imageless, formless, temporalizing character of that which exceeds even language:

If Robin could have found someone to tell her she was innocent, she would have found someone who had raised her to the level of the human—someone who had given her "permission to live" as a human being, not merely as an amorphous mass of moral possibility.22 (emphasis mine)

The elevation to the plane of the human entails the accession to the frame of language, the form of morality, both of which are, here, dual aspects of the same phenomenon: "Felix fails with Robin [she will not listen to him], just as do the others who try to provide her with a moral framework."23 Robin is "innocent" because she has yet to be told so. No one is able to "tell her" because the telling of innocence is its negation. To be aware of one's innocence—to know what one does not know—is no longer to be innocent. Innocence is nostalgic insofar as it can only be remembered; it is a myth constructed a posteriori. Innocence, like egotism, is one more part of a "moral framework." It belongs to language, form, image, human. Yet as myth it is pre-language, pre-form, pre-image, pre-human; it is atemporal, non-spatial, frozen in an "instant of time."
The moral imperative is at work at every level of Frank's commentary.

Jenny's relationship to Robin differs from those of Felix and Nora, for she has no intuition of Robin's pathetic moral emptiness. . . . To fall from Nora to Jenny--to exchange the moral world of one for the moral world of the other--is only too convincing a proof that Robin has failed to acquire any standards of value.24

That which has no internal regulating center—that is, no "moral framework" or "standards of value"—is, for Frank, exactly the center of Nightwood. At the heart of Barnes' novel is instability, but an instability that has been interiorized within a form, a character: Robin Vote. Perhaps what both fascinates and perturbs Frank is that Robin Vote's exterior and interior, her humanity and ahumanity, can never coincide. Between them is the fissure in which Frank finds a space for his discourse. But this space is never saturated; in it commentary can go on indefinitely. If there is a fissure at the center of the center of Nightwood, this modernist novel must nonetheless invoke balance.

Nightwood must end with its center, for however irreconcilable the split within the novel's central form, unity must be preserved at the level of the Form: "Since the doctor is not the center of the pattern in Nightwood, the novel cannot end merely with his last appearance."25 The center—Robin Vote—will have been the end in advance. Balance implies and entails this teleology.

* * *

One critical commonplace among many is that the modernist creates art as an attempt to overcome temporality. Of course, one can trace this theme—the vagaries of experience redeemed in the permanence of art—from Shakespeare's sonnets to Wordsworth's meditations and Pound's cantos, these being merely three exemplary moments in this tradition. But Frank's argument is that the modernist is the first to cast this theme self-consciously in the form—as opposed to the content—of his work. The presentation itself attempts a blow against time: Frank sees in the plastic arts the manifestation of the atemporality to which modernist literature aspires. Because
modernism radically foregrounds spatial form, it becomes a literature of flat surfaces. Concomitant with this reduction of "ordinary" three-dimensionality is the reduction of "natural" representations (naturalism) to non-natural representations (non-naturalism):

Worringer argues that we have here a fundamental polarity between two distinct types of creation in the plastic arts

[naturalistic and non[naturalistic]. And, most important of all, neither can be set up as the norm to which the other must adhere.26

With the advent of non-naturalism there exists two distinct forms of art that, though implicit critical reactions to one another, can never judge one another by appealing to a norm. Moreover, a new critical vocabulary will be required by non-naturalism, for unlike the premises of referentiality underlying naturalism and its critical lexicon, non-naturalism--and by inference, the critical discourse that should accompany it--closes out referentiality and opens itself up to its own sui generis powers:

Riegl had argued that the impulse to creation in the plastic arts was not primarily an urge toward the imitation of the organic world. Instead, he postulated what we called an absolute will-to-art, or better still, will-to-form.27

With a move that is perhaps the origin of the critique of modernism's alienation from a world it views at best with indifference, Worringer, says Frank, traces the development of non-naturalistic art to the disintegration of the old order of the world:

Naturalism, Worringer points out, always has been created by cultures that have achieved an equilibrium between man and the cosmos . . . when the relationship between man and the cosmos is one of disharmony and disequilibrium we find that non-organic, linear, geometric styles are always produced . . . the dominance of the plane in all types of plastic art.28

The excision of the third dimension is, for Frank, the excision of the world of time:

"Since literature is a time-art, we shall take "our point of departure from Worringer's
discussion of the disappearance of depth in non-naturalistic styles.\textsuperscript{29} The conflation of the world of time with the world of three dimensions makes time an effect of space--Einstein's universe--which is why Frank can claim that the "plastic arts have been most spatial when they did not represent the space dimension and least spatial when they did."\textsuperscript{30}

Frank underscores the conventional wisdom that time is a burden for the artist by writing that "contemporary art and literature have, each in its own way, attempted to overcome the time elements involved in their own structures." Of course, what is being attempted is the overcoming not of time as a concept but time conceived as a linear phenomenon:

\begin{quote}
Time is no longer felt as an objective causal progression with clearly marked-out differences between periods; now it has become a continuum in which distinctions between past and present are wiped out.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

This view of time in modernist works repeats most of the critical work on the modernists. Thus the spatial complexity, cross-reference, and above-below juxtaposition of high-low cultural artifacts in \textit{Ulysses}, \textit{The Waste Land}, and \textit{The Cantos}, for example, are read as part of the desire for the eternal present presence of past and future.

Frank's reading of the relative importance and unimportance of, respectively, space and time in modernism entails that he consider the historical and cultural analogue of spatial form, and given the significance he grants to the pictorial arts, it is not surprising that the museum as institution is modernism's predecessor: "The real museum emerged on the scene only in the eighteenth century, when art finally became detached from any religious or cultural extra-aesthetic value. . . ."\textsuperscript{32} But this seems true only in a most overt and superficial sense. The displacement of the art object from its historical milieu does not mean that it is thereby placed into an ahistorical context. The museum conceals its attachment to both religious and cultural "extra-aesthetic
value." Moreover, the aesthetic itself is formulated within culture at specific historical moments by "extra-aesthetic value."

Frank's reluctance to admit the forces of history into the province of the art work turns about face when he discusses the New Critics in the latter half of his book. He defends their work by reminding us of the cultural and historical contexts in which they wrote:

It should never be forgotten that many of the positions of the New Criticism were thrashed out in polemics with Marxists or Marxist-influenced opponents during the Thirties; and it is curious that the very writers who attack the New Criticism in the name of history should never have tried to interpret its positions in their historical context. Faced with the attempt to appropriate literature for purely social and propagandistic purposes, it was only natural for the New Critics, defending the autonomy and integrity of art, to exaggerate and overemphasize its purity and independence from immediate social and political concerns. The concentration of criticism on "form" was a natural result of this reaction, which was based on the belief that the defense of the freedom of art was itself a vital social imperative.33

This review serves as a corrective to, not an excuse of, ahistoricism. But if I ascribe these sentiments to Frank who, here, seems to recognize the relative autonomy of art, it is to underscore what he has, nevertheless, said about modernism and the museum, remarks that seem to both describe and uphold a belief in the absolute autonomy of art.

Now---near the end of his book---there is an explicit movement in Frank's argument from description to prescription. Art is privileged relative to human experience. Thus Frank paraphrases with approval R. P. Blackmur's and the other New Critics' hierarchizing of poetry relative to criticism: "Poetry, in other words, deals with the actual because it deals with thought so far as it comes alive as experience of feeling; critical prose can express abstract ideas or ideals, independent of their emotional
Because the critic's ideas or ideals cannot have the kind of access to "emotional actuality" as the poet's, the critic is forced to inhabit a plurality of perspectives from which to gauge the art work's encounter with experience. This plurality of perspectives effectively negates the possibility of privileging any one perspective. This strategy is the deployment and valorization of irony. Frank praises Blackmur for exemplifying the ironic posture better than most:

In *Language as Gesture*, this imaginative approach to doctrine is still used largely as a critical working principle. Mr. Blackmur was determined not to fall into the error of various kinds of ideological critics, who analyzed and evaluated literature in terms of their agreement or disagreement with its "ideas." But it is revealing to see Mr. Blackmur generalizing this imaginative approach, and applying it not only to literature but at all attempts to interpret the meaning of experience. In "A Critic's Job of Work," he praises the skepticism and dramatic irony of the early Plato and of Montaigne because neither wishes to be fixed in any doctrine. And Mr. Blackmur's sympathy with such writers, it is clear, stems from his own facility in imaginatively entering any framework of ideas without feeling obliged to come to terms with it liberally as doctrine. . . . Any perspective thus becomes tragic when, instead of being used to illuminate some particular area of experience, it is clung to desperately as an absolute and literal truth.

All of this is meant to devalue the critic and his prose to the poet and his verse because the former expresses only "ideas or ideals" while the latter expresses "emotional actuality." But in fact poetry is more valuable than criticism only from the perspective of human experience. Concerning truth-values criticism is more valuable than poetry. The critic has access to the truth-value of the experience expressed by the poet. The critic extracts and exhibits the truth from the ironic postures he adopts relative to the "form" of the modern poem. Truth arises as an effect of irony and reveals irony as the truth of the modern poem. That this truth is just another term in the critical lexicon can
never be asserted since to do so would be to question the critic's independence from ideology.

Irony is the critical figure par excellence for Frank because it serves to both thwart the ideologically "suspect" like Joyce, Lawrence, and Mann as well as neutralize the ideologically "problematic" like Eliot and Pound. Irony anchors art amidst the shifting tides of history and preserves the status quo at every level of experience. Irony is thus order and form. "These names [Joyce, Yeats, Eliot, Mann] show that Mr. Blackmur is not on the side of any particular orthodoxy, but he is on the side of the human effort intrinsic to the order of art itself." Irony is thus the rhetorical name of spatial form.

Frank concludes his essay by sparring with Lionel Trilling who argues that "these critics are [not] as free from ideology as they pretend; in reality their so-called aesthetic judgments are profoundly steeped in concealed cultural preferences and moral assumptions." Frank's predictable response is to retreat to the great divide he has carved between art and non-art:

No political ideology of any kind can compete with literature in the delicacy of its reaction to human experience. Even Mr. Trilling would agree that his favorite, Edmund Burke, whom he so often quotes with approval, hardly rivals Wordsworth in the range of his responses to the French Revolution. In order words, Mr. Trilling's criticism of the liberal imagination revealed nothing that was not equally true of any politics that sets itself up as a total view of human reality; and he actually criticizes politics from the point of view of art, a point of view happily free from the limiting conditions of all political action. Yet by confining his criticism to the liberal imagination, and not extending it to politics in general, Mr. Trilling implied that his views had immediate practical and political relevance. Walled up in the towering form of art the critic's "ideas or ideals" are impotent and irrelevant. All he can do is praise the architects of his imprisonment and scorn those
who insist that the foundation of his insularity rests on property on which taxes must be paid.

The problems that the concept of spatial form give rise to are present today. In a recent anthology in homage to Frank, *Spatial Form in Narrative*, these problems begin with the editors themselves.\(^{39}\) Thus, on the one hand, Jeffrey R. Smitten cautiously observes that, "As used in this book 'spatial form' in its simplest sense designates the techniques by which novelists subvert the chronological sequence inherent in narrative." But spatial form also "embraces both a set of narrative techniques and the reading process itself."\(^{40}\) Once again it becomes a matter of the form of techniques, the form of a process, how what is closed can account for what is open.

Behind the desire to enclose the reading process and narrative techniques is the value of limits and order. Inasmuch as spatial form "designates" and "embraces," it delimits the narrative techniques that precede it and the field of reading which follows it. Finding themselves in medias res, between the artist and reader, spatial form theorists would be satisfied, for the privileging of the artist over the critic is a value deeply entrenched in literary theory. But readers and readings precede and follow the establishment of spatial form. In this scenario the stakes are high. It becomes necessary to reign in "errant" readings and theories that exceed in advance the territory to be staked out by belated spatial form theorists: "What is the need that 'Spatial Form in Modern Literature' meets? It is the reader's and critic's need to see united under a single rubric three fundamental aspects of narrative: language, structure and reader perception." The spatial form theorist must put into abeyance the constructive implication of "perception" despite its apparent equality here. If it is true that the suppression of "causal/temporal connectives" prevent the reader from locating "characters and events in space and time," it is also true that the reader will often imagine a space and time for those characters and events. When Smitten draws examples from *The Waste Land* to show the paucity of
specific places and times, he ignores the fact that the general places ("Summer surprised us, coming over the Starudergerssee") and time ("April is the cruelest month") function as skeletal frames on which the reader imaginatively constructs a world of space and time.41

Smitten's inability to imagine the constructive powers of the reading process leads him to conflate reading with understanding. When he writes that "The units of narrative, in Frank's words, must be seen as juxtaposed in spaces, not unrolling in time," the subjunctive imperative ("must be seen"), even if ascribed to Frank, is not coincidental. Here, understanding is seeing. But the power of the image (the "units of narrative") lures Smitten into taking the analogy between "seeing" with the mind (understanding as "I see") and seeing with the eye for an actual commutative relationship. But one can see without understanding and one can understand without seeing. Moreover, seeing and understanding are processes; they do unroll in time. And the same can be said for "units of narrative" which are read "unrolling in time" even as they are "juxtaposed in space."42

The "units of narrative" are privileged by spatial form theory only so they can be set into a pattern within the totality of the work: "When these departures ['from a pure temporality'] are great enough, the conventional causal/temporal syntax of the novel is disrupted and the reader must work out a new one by considering the novel as a whole in a moment of time."43 If it seems contradictory to say that the reader constructs a new "causal/temporal syntax" by "considering the novel as a whole in a moment of time," it is because Smitten has in mind two concepts: time and temporality. The latter occurs within the other. Time is an "instant of time," which is time in the form of an eternal presence. Here, reading and understanding do not coincide. (Temporal) reading takes place within (spatial) understanding. Understanding would have had to precede reading; spatial form would have had to precede its "discovery" by theorists reading in a certain way. For if the opposite were true, if understanding took place because of reading, then understanding would go on indefinitely because reading goes on indefinitely. No longer
would there be an open process (reading) within a closed product (understanding). the
spatialized "instant" of understanding would be uncoiled and strung out indefinitely by the
temporality of reading. The spatial form theorist can protect the integrity of the instant
only by abstracting from temporality the metaphysical concept of time.44

In the same anthology, Ann Daghistany and J. J. Johnson demonstrate this tendency in
their essay "Romantic Irony, Spatial Form and Joyce's Ulysses." They write that the
reader "must be able to see any event in the context of the narrative as a whole." This
abstraction from the "units of narrative" to "the narrative as a whole" stems from "the
immense spiritual dread of space," a dread based on the display of temporality by space.
As anti-representation, abstraction is bound to closure, to form, since the foreclosure of
representations of the world delimits the function of temporality. Abstraction thus
arrests the expansion of space--spatiality--into the four dimensions of the Einsteinian
world.45

Form is closure. With the possible exception of Dada, art movements concerned with
exploring all kinds of abstraction--Surrealism, Symbolism, Cubism, etc.,--foreground
problems of form and closure: "For Worringer, abstraction depends on closedness: all
facets of the individual object are represented in a closed planimetric whole." And thus
"Dread of space has been replaced by dread of time; the aim of each artist is to reduce the
world of objects to a closed temporal whole."46 It is not that dread of space has been
replaced; if anything it is both a dread of spatiality and temporality, a dread of difference
and change.

Furthermore, dread may not be the impetus at all. Many contemporary
abstractionists--for example, some of the language poets--are motivated by
programmatic critiques of the "real" under the banner of politics. In this respect it is
important to recall that both the modernists and language poets come from opposing
political camps; moreover both refuse realism as bourgeois decadence and ideological. I
believe even Eliot would have accepted the Marxist category "false consciousness," though
for very different reasons. Such a reading of left and right abstractionists might tempt one to reduce political beliefs to psychoanalytic categories, but this would still not justify citing psychological trauma as the impetus for abstraction.47

The work of William V. Spanos may constitute the most severe criticism of spatial form theory to date, and so any defense of spatial form theory has to confront his criticism. Daghistany and Johnson criticize Spanos for linking the perception of form with divine omniscience:

Spanos confuses omniscience, which would be a simultaneous grasping of all possible perspectives on something, with the capacity to grasp form and to perceive, and organize particulars through and with that form. Perhaps this is godlike, but it is a human capacity also.48

Is it really Spanos who is confused here? Omniscience has nothing to do with simultaneity; one may know all without knowing all at once. The "capacity to grasp form" is the pretension to omniscience because the organization of particulars depends on memorization and imagination. Form must be imagined on the basis of "recalled" particulars, otherwise, simultaneity of perspectives is necessary. Thus the organization of particulars "through and with that form" is metaphorical. Now the movement of metaphor already implies abstraction, the transference of a particular tenor to a "non-real" state by way of a particular vehicle. Abstraction as form delimits spatiality and temporality into a space, a time. The one who "grasps" form imagines omniscience. And to imagine this "godlike" power means that one is removed from what one believes one has grasped: Joyce's god "paring his fingernails":

As he grasps the relationships between the parts through reflexive reference, the attentive reader of spatial form begins to perceive a pattern or whole form. The perception of spatial form demands the reader maintain an aesthetic distance from the particulars of the work, so that he may see the whole.49

As in the work of David Hult, the notion of "aesthetic distance" is necessary for the
imagination of closure. The reader remains outside and functions as the gate that closes when reading begins. To close the distance between oneself and the text is to become immersed in Daghistany's and Johnson's "particulars," Smitten's "units of narrative," and yes, even Frank's "striking passages." One fetishizes forms and ignores the Form. And before they are striking passages, units of narrative or particulars, the characters, settings and objects of the modernist work are first and foremost forms. Thus,

the reader is encouraged to identify not as a particular human being with particular characters but as a human soul experiencing a form, such as a square or labyrinth, oriented by the interaction of fictional beings with one another and with their environment.50

This identification threatens but does not collapse aesthetic distance insofar as it occurs after the Form has been read as a whole. And it is clear that the shift from "human being" to "human soul" is meant to suggest that the Form lies dormant before the life-force of the reader arrives to give it vitality. I remind my reader that the reader of the modernist Form also gives it intentionality and meaning. And as the intended meaning of the modernist work is its Form, I gather all the concepts here. The Form lies outside history, so it is up to the reader to give it intended meaning in an instant of time, which is exactly its Form. And this gives it its life. It is clear why the reader must not fetishize forms. To do so would be to give life not to one voice but to a cacophony of Babelian tongues. The ontotheological moorings of spatial form theory are made explicit in Daghistany's and Johnson's essay:

The romantic ironists were clearly pointing beyond the espousal of Romantic individualism or the glorification of the solitary ego. Indeed, the idea in the twentieth century toward which they point is modern ecological consciousness, the sanctity of systems as wholes.51

The erasure of differences is the "glorification of the solitary ego." The so-called "modern ecological consciousness" does indeed sanctify "systems as wholes," but that may
be the problem not the solution. That Heideggerian Thing, self-named *homo sapien*, so desires an end to conflict between races, ethnic cultures, nations, men and women, humanity and nature, etc. that it dreams of the possibility of an absolute and final unification of thoughts and desires. This "consciousness" is hardly "modern."52

If form is imagined by readers, then the question of form is related to the question of the image. To imagine is to image forth, and what comes before a reader is in fact behind his eyes in his brain where he imagines form. The image then is a form. I want to now examine some ideas about the nature of this form as presented in the work of W. J. T. Mitchell. In particular, I want to consider the pictorial and religious affinities of the image.

W. J. T. Mitchell's *Iconology*53 began as an essay against the "tyranny of the image," but wound up as a study of the permutations of the concept of the image. Beneath the various forms of the image--graphic, optical, perceptual, verbal, etc.--Mitchell locates the common denominators of likeness, similitude and resemblance:

The image is the general notion, ramified in various specific similitudes (*convenientia, aemulatio, analogy, sympathy*) that hold the world together with "figures of knowledge." Presiding over all the special cases of imagery, therefore, I locate a parent concept, the notion of the image "as such," the phenomenon whose appropriate institutional discourses are philosophy and theology.54

The image is related to concepts of essentialism, the "as such" of philosophy and theology. But can the essentialism of the "parent concept" be reconciled with its offspring, those "figures of knowledge"? Can the "as such" give birth to a family of "as ifs"? I do not believe so because this relationship between the "as such" and "as ifs" is in fact a relationship between an ontology and the epistemologies that can be derived from it. But if ontologies are effects of epistemologies as I've argued, it may be that the image as such
is the offspring of a number of parent concepts: convenientia, aemulatio, analogy, sympathy.

Mitchell notes that Wittgenstein placed mental maps in the same category as patches of colors seen and sounds heard, that is, in the same category as visual and aural images: "it is a bit hard, however," he says, "to see how we can put mental and physical images 'in the same category'. "The validity of Mitchell's refusal depends on what is meant by "the same category." Certainly it cannot be a matter of the inside/outside difference since the color images are not out there while the mental images are in here. As images both activities are mental. Nor can it be a matter of distinguishing "perception" from "ideas" (as the New Critics and Frank tend to do) since this invariably conjures up the intelligible/sensible distinction. It appears that Mitchell stumbles into ideology here: the confusion of the thing with its representation.55

Mitchell may have meant to distinguish perceptual images from imaginary images, a difficult procedure that would have entailed a thorough reading of, for one, psycholinguistic literature. At any rate the failure to explain himself on this point leads Mitchell into unnecessary difficulties: "The problem philosophers and ordinary people have always had with the notion of mental images is that they seem to have a universal basis in real shared experience . . . but we cannot point to them and say 'There--that is a mental image.'" But this "problem" may also be extended to images in general. It arises each time one tries to point to an image for someone who does not already know what type of image one means. Thus, if I point to Xeusis painting and say "There--that is a physical image," might not an onlooker ask, "Do you mean the grapes? Or the color purple?"56 Mitchell's contention that we cannot point to mental images is specious if he means literally pointing, and it is essentialistic if he means that for a given occasion there ought to be or is one kind of image we all recognize. If I ask an English-speaking audience to sketch a tree, there will be similarities--but not exact duplications--between the drawings. The extent to which all the drawings demonstrate "treeness" is the extent to
which all members of the audience have learned the concept "tree." We must have already had a mental image of what a mental image might be in order to ask the question of the existence and resemblance between individual mental images. I thus turn from Mitchell momentarily to examine one exemplary history of the concept of the image.

In Ray Frazer's 1960 essay "The Origin of the Term 'Image,'" he writes that the term image "originally meant no more than a picture, imitation or copy."57 This definition contradicts Mitchell who finds the origin of the image in likeness, resemblance and similitude. As Mitchell notes in his gloss of Frazer, the progressive sublimation of the image was accompanied by the decline in the stature of rhetorical figures and tropes. Up to and throughout the Renaissance the poet was conceived of as a maker. A good poem was artifice; it could be described completely in terms of figures.58 Thus Frazer: "A poem's structure might be one figure, its logical progression another; and its phrasing, language and even spelling, still others." Poetry was technical virtuosity that interfused logic and rhetoric.59

This relation between poetry, logic, and rhetoric began to dissolve in the seventeenth century under the assault of philosophical empiricism, science, anti-religious sentiments, and the French classical influence on the court of Charles. Restoration writers became obsessed with what they viewed as the postlapsarian duplicity of writing. And if writing was a necessary error, figures and tropes were doubly wrong, compounding sin upon sin. The need to explain the intractable metaphors of the Bible became acute and the results were often bizarre if predictable. The metaphoricity of Scripture was explained away as a consequence of the "small vocabularies" of ancient cultures. For example, Robert Boyle reminded his audience that the Asiatic peoples were naturally inclined to "dark and Involv'd Sentences," "figurative and Parabolical Discourse" and "Abrupt and Maim'd Expression." Thus the cultural interdiction against rhetoric (even today we speak of pretentious or deceptive speech as so much "rhetoric" or meaningless questions as "rhetorical").60
By the late eighteenth century the degradation of rhetoric and its pejorative linkage to ethnic and cultural prejudice was complete. Once the *techne* of rhetoric had given way to the *effect* of rhetoric, interest shifted from authorial ingenuity to audience response:

What has happened is a change in interest from the writer to the reader, from an analysis of the technique of expression to an analysis of the nature of the response. It was the process of substitution and the type of relation between terms which interested the classical rhetorician; to the eighteenth century critic "figurative language" (the new, less precise, term) is evaluated according to its effect on the reader.61

For Hobbes and the associationists, the image became the fundamental "link between experience and knowledge." All we know registers in the mind after entering through the senses as images. Consequently fancy and imagination were possible only because of the vast storehouse of images in the mind. Nothing was ever imagined ex nihilio. This emphasis on the secondary nature of all art served to hold still the distinction between man and God--the only One to have created anything (the universe) ex nihilio. Associationist ideas may have influenced eighteenth century poetry, but the reverse may have been true too. Both theorists and poets concerned themselves with the effect of images on readers even as the poetry often used allegory and analogy to celebrate nature and flatter God. And yet, just as Wordsworth's spots of time tended to glorify themselves rather than intimate immortality, so the proliferation of images (ideas, pictorial, etc.) flattered the artist as much as they did the Artist--God. For if the craft of artists was secondary to the Artist, they were nonetheless disciples however unworthy. Only the crisis of Romantic self-doubt interrupted the movement from these ideas to those of Imagism, and from there to Modernism and the artist-as-priest.62

The legacy bequeathed to this century by both Imagism and Modernism is so widespread and thorough that it is almost invisible. In direct opposition to the Socratic dialogue, which proceeds by the logic of questions and answers, the imagist thesis is
always located in time and space. Unlike the discursive dialogue that attempts to
apprehend universal truths, the image/thesis announces its specificity. The valorization
of the image is evident at a myriad of levels in our culture: think of the importance we
attach to examples, illustrations, descriptions, evidence, etc., all forms of images. Form
as image is inescapable for the historicized consciousness of Western humanity, yet the
same is true for the Socratic dialogue which depends on a logic of figures: examples,
illustrations, etc., For us, the image is rhetoric. Hobbes and Locke loom again as
touchstones in this tradition. Thus the distrust of language in a culture consumed in
images. But if I acknowledge this distrust, am I confusing all types of images? Hobbes
and Locke conceive the image in visual terms. For Hobbes, "Although we do learn by
smell, taste, and touch, our primary source of knowledge--and therefore the most
powerful mode of communication--is visual." Addison wrote in the Spectator that "we
cannot indeed have a single image in the fancy that did not make its first appearance
through the sight." Mitchell takes an opposing position:

Insofar as language is written it is bound up with material, graphic figures and
pictures that are abridged or condensed in a variety of ways to form alphabetical
script. But the figures of writing and of drawing are from the first inseparable
from figures of speech, manners of speaking.

Whether valued or devalued, the reduction of the image to the essentially visual or
essentially oral gives it the value of an "as such" whether this "as such" is a "likeness"
or, as Frazer has it, "copy, imitation of picture." But the image is form as if it were the
image as such. Unlike Frazer, Mitchell and others who view the image as belated
representation, there are those for whom the image is a form that refers to nothing that
precedes it. Among the most experimental jazz, post-wave rebels, minimalist writers,
and so forth, the value of the image is strictly intrinsic.

Mitchell stresses the non-visual non-material origin of the term image by
demonstrating the religious prohibition against graven images. Thus, religious icons and
pictures are fundamentally heretical. According to Mitchell, the true image is spiritual or mental. The false figurative image is material, perceptible, especially by the eye:

The sense of an original "spiritual" meaning for a word and a later, derived "material" application may be difficult for us to comprehend, largely because our understanding of the history of words has been oriented around the empirical epistemology . . . This model has no greater power than in our understanding of the word "image" itself. . . . but what exactly is this "spiritual" likeness which is not to be confused with any material image? We should note first that it seems to include a presumption of difference.65

This difference between the aspirations of man and the perfection of God is already hierarchical; the spiritual image is again a late arrival. Under the auspices of this platonism, the forms of the material and worldly only approximate the spiritual and unworldly Form. This hierarchy between the human and divine justifies hierarchies within the human (intelligible over the sensible, reason over emotion, etc.) and between humans (castes, classes, races, etc.):

The distinction between the spiritual and material, inner and outer image, was never simply a matter of theological doctrine, but was always a question of politics, from the power of priestly castes, to the struggle between conservative and reform movements (iconophiles and iconoclasts), to the preservation of natal identity (the Israelites' struggle to purge themselves of idolatry).66

The decapitation of the Great Chain of Being begins with the institutionalization of the artificial perspective of Alberti in 1435 and is completed with the invention of the camera.67 The advent of visual realism accompanies bourgeois progressivism; the despiritualization of the concept of the image is doubtlessly read as progress even if the image still retains in its new materiality its secondariness. Before, it served as man's inner bridge to the divine. Then it served as man's outer bridge to the world of experience. What is often overlooked is that this realism is as much a construct as
The failure to account for the artificiality of realism is behind the failure to take into account the artificiality of concepts derived from the image:

It seems to me that Lessing, for instance, is absolutely right insofar as he regards poetry and painting as radically different modes of representation, but that his 'mistake' (which theory still participates in) is the reification of this difference in terms of analogous oppositions like nature and culture, space and time.\textsuperscript{68}

The fall of the image from its platonic post is also its fall out of time into space. The image is form in space—hence Lessing's delegation of spatiality as the essence of painting. Poetry, however, inhabits a world of time, a "radically different" mode. The imagery of poetry inhabits a prehistorical world of spaceless temporality while the imagery of painting inhabits a postlapsarian world of timeless spatiality. The theological language I use here underlines the idealist character of not only the concepts "poetry" and "painting," but also the tendency to read them in terms of metaphysical concepts like "space" and "time" even were one to concede a spatial dimension to poetry and a temporal one to painting. As Mitchell writes,

\begin{quote}
The differences between sign-types are matters of use, habit and convention. The boundary line between texts and images, pictures and paragraphs, is drawn by a history of practical differences in the use of different sorts of symbolic marks, not by a metaphysical divide.\textsuperscript{69}
\end{quote}

Whether it is conceived within the parameters of representation or abstraction, the image as form and the determination of space is already presence incarnate. Thus the absence of a semiotic critique of the image per se is as illuminating for Mitchell as the absence of a philosophical critique of presence is crucial for Derrida:

The failure of semiotics to provide a coherent account of imagery in its relations to other sign-types might have been predicted, I suspect, if its tendency to reintroduce these traditional distinctions in new terms had been acknowledged early on. It might have struck our notice, for instance, that Pierce's icon, symbol
and index are very much like Hume's three principles of association of ideas--
resemblance, contiguity and cause and effect. . . . 70

And Mitchell's critique of photorealism follows a line of argument similar to Derrida's
critique of the concept of perception:

The photograph occupies the same position in the world of material signs that the
'impression' does in the world of mental signs or 'ideas' in empirical
epistemology. And the same mystique of automation and natural necessity hovers
around these cognate notions. 71

Mitchell traces the mystification of the image into a doctrinaire realism to the work of
art and perception theorists Nelson Goodman and E. H. Gombrich. Thus, "The one place
where Goodman's refusal to consider ideological matters might conceivably blind him to
matters of central importance to his theory is in his treatment of realism." Goodman,
says Mitchell, treats realism as "a matter of habit and inculcation rather than illusion,
information, or semblance." 72 Mitchell's criticism of Gombrich is even more telling:

The 'nature' implicit in Gombrich's theory of the image is, it should be clear, far
from universal, but it is a particular historical formation, an ideology associated
with the rise of modern science and the emergence of capitalist economies in
Western Europe in the last four hundred years. It is the nature found in Hobbes
and Darwin, nature as antagonist, as evolutionary competition for survival, as
object for aggression and domination. It is, therefore, a nature in which man is
imagined chiefly in figures like the (male) hunter gatherer. The predatory
character of Gombrich's image reveals itself most clearly in its involvement with
processes of entrapment, illusion and capture. . . . It is . . . the figure of
production without labor, the unlimited consumption of reality, the fantasy of
instantaneous, unmediated appropriation. 73

The detachment of the concept of the image from "reality," that is, the positing of a
reality prior to the conception of the image, allows for the division between man and
nature, a gap into which the concepts of imagination at the cultural level, capitalism at the economic level, and theology at the philosophical level rush.

These theories of Goodman and Gombrich stem from Lessing's original distinctions between space and time in painting and poetry:

[Lessing's] distinction between the temporal and spatial arts turns out to operate only at the first level of representation, the level of direct and "convenient relation" (bequemes Verhältnis) between sign and signified. At a second level of inference where representations occur "indirectly" (andeutungsweise), the signifieds of painting and poetry become signifiers in their own right, and the boundaries between the temporal and spatial arts dissolve. Painting expresses temporal action indirectly, by means of bodies; poetry represents bodily forms indirectly, by means of actions. Lessing's whole distinction hangs, then, on the slender thread of the difference between primary and secondary representation, direct and indirect expression.74

As Mitchell's vocabulary suggests, the difference here is between expression, that is, direct primary representation, and representation, that is indirect secondary expression. Poetry expresses temporality and represents spatiality while painting expresses spatiality and represents temporality. In both cases expression is the name of immediacy, presence, form, image, etc. But even if I insist that there is only representation, only mediacy, this does not mean painting and poetry represent space and time simultaneously or to the same degree. If it is true that the "propriety of space and time in painting is at bottom a matter of the economy of signs, the difference between cheap, easy labor, and costly 'pains and efforts,'" this is so because that "convenient relation' between sign and signified" is arbitrary and culture-specific.75 That it entails "'pains and efforts'" to read otherwise does not mean that such a reading is unnatural or metaphorical. For as Mitchell says, a "poem is not literally temporal and figuratively spatial; it is literally a spatial-temporal construction."76 It is a construction under the
propriety of the image which governs the concepts of spatiality and temporality:

Let us concede that 'vision' is a 'necessary condition' for the apprehension of painting; it is certainly not a sufficient one, and there are many other 'necessary conditions'—consciousness, perhaps even self-consciousness, and whatever skills are required for the interpretation of the kind of image in question. At any rate, the point here is simply to call attention to a certain reification or essentializing of the senses in relation to the generic differences between words and images, a reification very much like the ones that occur with the categories of space and time, nature and convention.

The difficulty intrinsic to the demystification of the image only underscores the entrenchment of the imagist ideology. The mystique of the image is interrelated with the mythos of objective pure perception, the premise of Husserlian phenomenology:

The 'innocent eye' is a metaphor for a highly experienced and cultivated sort of vision. When the metaphor becomes literalized, when we try to postulate a foundational experience of 'pure' vision, a merely mechanical process uncontaminated by imagination, purpose or desire, we invariably rediscover one of the few maxims on which Gombrich and Goodman agree: 'the innocent eye is blind.' The capacity for a purely physical vision that is supposed to be forever inaccessible to the blind turns out to be a kind of blindness.??

This is why I do not understand ideology as false consciousness so much as the possibility of consciousness. This particular consciousness is no truer or falser than a Marxist consciousness, contrary to what Mitchell says. Indeed, the concept of a Marxism or communism in general would not have been conceivable without the foundations of feudalism and capitalism. Not only behind the inner/outer face of capitalism does the Janus-faced image reside:

Each [image of commodity and image of ideology] implies and generates the other in a dialectical fashion: ideology is the mental activity that projects and imprints
itself on the material world of commodities, and commodities are in turn the imprinted material objects that imprint themselves on consciousness . . . both are emblems of capitalism in action, one at the level of consciousness, the other in the world of objects and social relations. Thus, both are false images . . . the camera obscura of ideology produces 'idols of the mind' and the commodity fetish functions as an 'idol of the marketplace.' In the dialectic between them a whole world emerges.78

Mitchell's "false image" functions for him as Frank's "mere images" and correlate with Smitten's "unit of narrative" and Daghistan's and Johnson's "event." Though the language of Dagnistany and Johnson and Smitten is not pejorative here, they share with Frank and Mitchell an interdiction against the valorization of the part (which, as Wordsworth discovered, may be a whole onto itself). One can see why. To fetishize parts, fragments, one comes to value incoherency. None of these critics attack the image on the grounds that it continues the valorization of form. Rather, for these authors, it is the image's form that distracts readers from apprehending the larger Form (be it a text or a political ideology) to which it belongs.
NOTES


3 Frank 6.

4 Frank 10.

5 Frank 12.

6 Frank 8.

7 Frank 12-13.

8 Frank 13. The term castration is from Roland Barthes' lexicon, especially in S/Z (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977). I adopt the phalocentric term to show in what follows its impotence as an accurate "explanation" for the different writing and different reading practices of so-called readerly and writerly texts.

9 Frank 13.

10 Frank 13-14.

11 Frank 14-15.

12 Frank 15-16.

13 Frank 18.

14 This is Heidegger's point of departure and conclusion in Being and Time.

15 Frank 24. The links between vision, form, space and "pure time" constitute the general conception of the image, which I treat more fully in what follows. But briefly, the image as the locus of "pure time" or, as Frank notes, "not time," is already idealized. To the extent criticism valorizes images it valorizes idealism. Structuralism exemplifies this tendency (see Derrida's essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Human Sciences" which opens by saying that all criticism is a kind of structuralism).

16 Frank 26.

17 Frank 27.

18 Frank 29.

19 Frank 29-30.
Walter Sutton makes this point in his essay "The Literary Image and the Reader," *Journal of Aesthetics and Arts Criticism*, xvi (September 1957) 114-17. In a note appended to his essay Frank acknowledges Sutton's essay and claims agreement with it. But Frank ends his comment with this bit of new Critical irony: "But this [the impossibility of spatial form] has not stopped modern writers from working out techniques to achieve the impossible--as much as possible." (6) This acknowledgement of the gulf between intention and achievement may be assumed by Frank but it is not in what he always says in his essay on spatial form.

Frank 32-33.

Frank 34.

Frank 35.

Frank 42.

Frank 48.

Frank 52.

Frank 52.

Frank 53-54.

Frank 56.

Frank 57.


34 Frank 236.

35 Frank 236-37.

36 Frank 249.

37 Frank, "Lionel Trilling and the Conservative Imagination," 254.

38 Frank 255.


41 Smitten 17.

42 Smitten 18-19.

43 Smitten 20.

44 In Being and Time en passim Heidegger criticizes "time" on behalf of "temporality." But as Derrida has pointed out throughout a number of essays, "time" returns as a value by way of "being" and "presence." See especially his "Ousia and Gramma: Note on a Note from Being and Time" in his Margins of Philosophy, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982) 29-67.

45 Daghistany and Johnson 49.

46 Daghistany and Johnson 50.

47 But this doesn't mean political beliefs aren't "influenced" by psychological factors. For those who wish to engage Marx with Freud--just to cite a pairing of interest to many leftists--the crux of the matter is sorting out "determination" and "influence" both within and between each doctrine.

48 Daghistany and Johnson 51.

49 Daghistany and Johnson 52-53.

50 Daghistany and Johnson 55.

51 Daghistany and Johnson 55.

52 Heidegger is here my "example." There are several Heideggers: one is a card-carrying Nazi, another is a vocal critic of the technologism the Nazis embraced. These are, of course, not mutually exclusive, which is why I am not separating the man and his
philosophy. I am simple pointing out what others have: the divisive and varied directions of the philosophy. Some of what he wrote points to fascism, some to freedom. To cite Derrida again, there is both a Heideggerianism of the right and a Heideggerianism of the left. Common to both is the "ism-izing" of Heidegger. I hope I have not ism-ized Joseph Frank (or Olson Herrnstein-Smith, etc.) Rather I have tried to cite tendencies in each that link them to one another.

53 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986). Another important but different discussion of the image can be found in Irving Massey's *Find You the Virtue: Ethics, Image and Desire in Literature* (Fairfax, Virginia: The George Mason University Press, 1987). Massey concerns himself primarily with the ethics of the image and its relation to other aspects of language (e.g. metaphor). Massey arrives at the same conclusion as I do: the image is the possibility of form and closure. For Massey the image is even the possibility of thought itself ("A thought is an image, p. 6). Many other references affirm the link between closure, image, form and thought (pp. 4, 5, 6, 12, 13, 134, 135). And while Frank links "meaning" to form outside temporality, Massey says "image and meaning are discontinuous." This maneuver shifts meaning, for Massey, into the realm of speech, for he gives in to the temptation to link the image to seeing, and thus proceeds without any apparent recognition of the problems with linking the image to a metaphysics of sight and of thought.

54 Mitchell 11.

55 Mitchell 15.

56 Mitchell 17.


58 Frazer 150.

59 Frazer 150.

60 Frazer 150-55.

61 Frazer 153.

62 Mitchell 35-36. Mitchell notes that the division of the image into an inner image and an outer image by priesthood castes solidifies their power: everyone has an inner image or likeness to God but only the priests have access to the outer image of god. For example, in the Old Testament God appears only to kings and priests. It is this outer image as form, irony, "the work of art" (Frank) to which only the artist-as-priest has access.

63 Frazer 154-55.

64 Mitchell 27-28.

66 Mitchell 35.
67 Mitchell 37.
68 Mitchell 44.
69 Mitchell 69.
70 Mitchell 58.


72 Mitchell 72.
73 Mitchell 90.
74 Mitchell 101.
75 Mitchell 102.
76 Mitchell 103.
77 Mitchell 118.
78 Mitchell 162-63.
CHAPTER FOUR

If it is somehow a tribute to the spirit of New Criticism and spatial form theory to consider the overall form and thrust of Joseph Frank's work and those influenced by it, then such a method is troublesome vis-a-vis the work of William Spanos. Drawing largely on the work of an early Martin Heidegger--in particular the Heidegger of *Being and Time*--Soren Kierkegaard, and Gotthold Lessing, Spanos' work in the early and mid-Seventies bears the marks of destructive, existential and phenomenological hermeneutics. Though these three movements are rarely presented together in any of the three essays I shall be drawing on, I hope to show that there is nevertheless an affinity between the essays. This affiliation is grounded on their common element: the exposition of temporality as the "truth" of human existence.¹

In these three works Spanos offers an on-going corrective to spatial form theory. But this corrective goes so far that Spanos winds up supplanting the metaphysics of spatiality with a metaphysics of temporality. After examining Spanos' various hermeneutical strategies, I examine some aspects of Derrida's deconstructive challenge to hermeneutics. I conclude the chapter with a brief consideration of some other philosophical and scientific views of time. The section on science needs explaining since (1) this is a literary essay and (2) both Heidegger and Spanos view scientific thought as the culmination of metaphysical consciousness. As concerns point one, it is my expressed purpose to open up the concept of what references may be useful and what references may not be useful without pretending to write a theory of everything, and (2) Derrida eloquently demonstrates the link between all forms of thought--philosophical or scientific--that situate themselves between the endpoints of an ontotheology.² At the same time, the rigor of the arguments of these literary, philosophical and scientific texts point beyond teleological thinking. Whatever the appearances, this essay does not move closer to any "truth" concerning openness and closure. Rather, it adds links in a chain: closure, presence, form, meaning and image.

111
To examine the continuity of a metaphysics of temporality across these three very different essays of Spanos, I will not be concerned with the announced "subject" of a given essay. This is not an essay-by-essay critique. That I come up against contradictions is a problem for me, for Spanos--like Olson--emphasizes over and over the temporality of all acts. Contradiction belongs to classical logic, and classical logic values space and form and coherency. The reservations concerning the critique of Olson apply here. My analysis of Olson's projective verse essay is valid only to the extent Olson's argument obeys the logic of classical law (and I believe it does). With Spanos I show that the contradictions are also his problem. They point to his attempt to reconcile "authentic" temporality with a delimited temporality.

I begin with one of Spanos' seminal essays: "Modern Literary Criticism and the Spatialization of Time: An Existential Critique." In this work Spanos criticizes Frank's spatial form theory on the ground that it negates the heterogeneity that temporality induces in what Spanos calls "existential experience." For Spanos, the spatial enclosure of New Criticism has cut it off from this existential experience. He thus proposes existential hermeneutics as a remedy for this radical dissociation from life. Spanos argues that literary criticism must not only foreground the temporality of the texts it analyzes. Criticism must temporalize its readings and acknowledge the temporality of what it reads because all human acts (e.g. writing literature) can be "authentically"--by which Spanos means "correctly"--understood by temporalizing understanding: thus existential hermeneutics.

Spanos begins the essay by arguing that the utilitarianism of Anglo-American literary criticism "between the Victorian and World War I periods" was not an aberrant use of literature. What was aberrant was the belief that literature was this use: "a utility, or Ι." Thus Spanos separates his critique of that period of Anglo-American criticism from that of the New Critics for whom literature was also an It--but one without utility. Hence the New Critics argued that those literary elements that resisted
the pull of history should be emphasized above those clearly rooted in history.

Spanos argues that literature is not an it and that it does serve purposes. He accuses the New Critics of "dogmatizing its autotelic nature." This is not exactly what Spanos means to say, but the imprecision is revealing. After all, if literature is in fact "autotelic," then the question of its dogmatization is not an issue. But Spanos does not believe literature is autotelic. What he means to say here is that the New Critics absolutized the autonomy of literature. Spanos believes its autonomy is relative. Perhaps Spanos means the New Critics dogmatized literature's autotelic aspect. This is accurate since the valorization of literature's autotelic aspect was related to emphasizing its ahistoric elements. As Spanos says, this indicates the New Critical "impulse to disengage literature from the defiling contingencies of life in historical time" but it is important to recall that for the New Critics literature was anchored in culture and history even as it aspired to the condition of ahistoricity. The resulting tension is, for the New Critics, the paradigm of irony, for irony as a figure is the relationship between historicism and ahistoricism.³

Spanos' existential hermeneutics counters Frank's valorization of spatial form by appealing to the "time-shape" of reading literature. Despite the value of the term "shape" (which I discuss below), the term "shape" turns out to be more constraining than it might at first appear or warrant. Shape refers not just to the historicity of the reader, but also to critical constraints (e.g., the concept of "dehumanization") the reader imposes upon the text. If existential hermeneutics depends on "authentic" temporality, this temporality should escape all forms insofar as form reduces temporality to time as an effect of space. Such a temporality, however, would be difficult to "use" since it would supervene that to which it was to be "placed" for use. This is the unsaid consequence Spanos realizes and denies when he writes that the New Critics dogmatized literature's "autotelic nature." For Spanos himself argues that literature is essentially temporal. In short, in its commitment to an end, however general and undogmatic as
"enhancing its [humanity's] quality in real life," existential hermeneutics as much as spatial form forecloses the literature it seeks to open. And this because it conceives of reading as invoking a necessary "time-shape."

The "essentialist" sees man from the end to the beginning while the "existentialist" sees man from the middle to the end. Both are driven toward ends: both are animated by nostalgia (the existentializing temporal form theorist) and hope (the essentializing temporal form theorist). At the moment the existential hermeneuticist posits literature's "end" as the enhancement of human life, he has narrowed literature.

Now when the New Critics refer to literature's "useless" aspect, they refer to aestheticism which contravenes all efforts to "use" it. Spanos historicizes this aestheticism, but it remains an open question whether or not the totality of aestheticism is susceptible to historicist demystification. And even so--how to demystify the demystifiers?

But must one choose between two asceticisms? Between pleasure and utility? Only if one forgets that pleasure and utility are phenomenological experiences of the reader. For the reader, the same work can, at different times, be useful and useless, pleasurable and unpleasurable. This means that "ends" as such are never "there," for every end toward which one tends--even the enhancement of life--contains another possibility just beyond: e.g., the dis-enhancement of life.

The work of literary criticism entails limits to readings, for there is no criticism without brackets. For Spanos, as for Frank, the valorization of an end is linked to closure and presence. Thus Spanos ties together "the phenomenological articulation of the ontology that inheres in the formal structure" with "what I prefer to call the 'time-shape' of the particular work." This "work" is later specified as an "event." Now the term "shape" appeals to spatiality even if its qualified status reminds us that a shape is not necessarily bounded on all sides; that's why there can be open forms. As it turns out, however, this time-shape is bounded. But the shape of the event alters according to "its
relationship to the prevailing world view(s)" and "its ontological commitment from the critics's own perspective."^6

This differs significantly from Eliot's notion that the creation of a work of art alters the interrelationships--or tradition--of all the previous works of art. For Spanos the time-shape of the artistic event alters when the critic and world-view change. For Eliot the work of art itself never changes, only its "position" relative to the other works. For Spanos the work of art is existential; for Eliot, essential. But for both "form" (text or tradition) remains intact even if its shape alters.

Spanos cites the New Critics' appeal to the plastic arts as proof of their spatializing tendencies. But if the New Critics' analogy between the literary and plastic arts has become so "ingrained in the consciousness of these critics that it has become the root archetype of their critical vocabulary," this doesn't mean Spanos disagrees with the distinctions on which the analogy is founded. Though he writes that "the new Critics and their progeny . . . assume the literary work to be such that, like the modern abstract painting or sculpture, we apprehend it more or less simultaneously in an instant of time," Spanos agrees with the distinction itself since, for him, the spatial perspective tends "to abstract or to dehumanize literary art." But the spatial perspective as the valorization of simultaneity dehumanizes the plastic arts too. As we shall see, it is not that Spanos has simply neglected the dehumanization of the plastic arts by spatial form theory. He agrees in principle with Lessing's spatial/temporal distinctions.7

But if it is an illusion that the plastic arts are more spatial than temporal, that the literary arts are more temporal than spatial, then Spanos perpetuates the illusion when he uses Lessing's distinctions to argue against the New Critics propensity to spatialize texts. Such is the basis of his criticism of Cleanth Brooks' critical presuppositions:

As long as he is dealing with a lyrical poem, say, Tennyson's "Tears, Idle Tears," or Yeats's "Among School Children," where the time-shape is apparently less important than the image or metaphor patterns, this kind of spatial apprehension
is obscured. But when he is confronting a genre where the emphasis is
essentially temporal--the novel or the drama, for example--the New Critical
techniques of spatial analysis--and its reductive implications--become
dramatically clear.

Lyric poems may be analyzed spatially because "the time-shape is apparently less
important than the image or metaphor patterns," but it is prominent in the drama or
novel which are "essentially temporal." Why aren't "image or metaphor patterns"
equally important in novels or dramas? Why aren't lyric poems "essentially
temporal?" Spanos on Brooks again: "As brilliant as the explication is [Brook's "famous
explication of 'Macbeth'"], it is, nevertheless, primarily a study of the reflexive
relationship between images with only passing reference to the sequence of events that
generates and is ontologically prior to the image."9

Both Spanos' "images" and "image" refer to Frank's "striking passages." The "image"
here refers to the entirety of an event perceived by a viewer. The "image" is composed
of "images." These too must be events. Events are images, and imaginable because of
their time-shape. The image is thus spatial and temporal. So one can discuss the
temporal dimension of a lyric as much as much can discuss the spatial dimension of a
drama. Neither dimension is more essential to a specific art--literary or plastic--or a
specific genre.

Spanos links the essential, temporal, literature, etc. because he believes--with
Heidegger--that existence is essentially temporal (cf. Being and Time). For both,
spatiality is associated with hierarchy, oppression, sedentary culture, etc. But if I
follow a number of commentators on the Jew/Greek temporal/spatial difference, I must
insist that only space--not spatiality--could give rise to the above effects. And as I've
noted before, this space is bound up with what Heidegger calls time: the mystification of
temporality that gives rise to theology and technology.9

Like Frank, Spanos wants to have it both ways with regard to Lessing. He writes that
Lessing is "clearly wrong in his insistence that a painting or a sculpture is perceived in an absolute instant of time." Since there can't be a relative instant of time, how is it that "Lessing's distinction obviously has ultimate validity, especially its focus on the sequential character of the verbal medium..." Like Frank, Spanos forgets that a painting must also be read, must be viewed sequentially (which is not to say linearly). The media of both the plastic and literary arts are fixed; neither words nor colors move. And the reader or viewer both must move his eyes. Staring is no more the perception of a painting than it is the reading of a text. As for Frank, so for Spanos: perception means taking in the whole work, or its essence, all at once. Perception--spatial grasping or temporal understanding--is a totalizing concept.

Spanos' criticism of Brooks is fraught with ambivalence. When he implies that genres within literature are to varying degrees temporal, he has not only said that they are to varying degrees spatial (e.g., the lyric is more spatial and less temporal than the novel) but that there is no essentiality whatsoever. One would think this would be fine since Spanos has been arguing against essentialism altogether. But Spanos seems to recognize that as the critical enterprise in general tends toward essentialism inasmuch as it formalizes its strategies, then there might be acceptable "limits" even for the existentialist critic. Temporal form turns out to be applicable not only to art events but to critics too.

This retreat from the radical openness of existentialism marks the discussion of "man-in-the-middle," Spanos' term for existential man's life on earth. For Spanos, this middle "state" does not preclude nostalgia or hope since man-in-the-middle lives within "the condition of human freedom" which "is a recalcitrantly fluid image with uncertain limits." However "uncertain," there are "limits." The alterable time-shape of the artistic event has its analogue in the flux of the temporal form of man-in-the-middle. The boundaries of these forms turn out to be the limits of humanization: "But at certain theoretical points in either direction from the middle... the effort "to enhance"
inevitably becomes a process of degradation, or dehumanization." However agreeable this argument, it is posed from a point of view that presupposes a human identity (however in flux). This presupposition is, however, "authentic" for the critic. It is only a presumption for the artist. To put it another way, whatever presuppositions about the "human(e)" the artist may demonstrate in his art work, they can only be judged authentic or inauthentic by the critic. The dialogue that Spanos urges between critics and artists is really a question-and-answer session. The artist "questions," the critic answers. The critic monitors that modern adventurer, "the irresponsible artist, the arbiter of what art is and what man-in-the-world should be like." The temerity of the artist is linked to his refusal to talk with the critic. What provokes Spanos is not the incommunicative art work or artist but the critics who, "by default of evaluation," have allowed the artist to circumvent criticism and engage in direct dialogue with an audience.12

This is the Arnoldian notion of the critic as cultural guardian, a culture whose on-going identity (flux makes problematic its identity) is negotiated by the critic and artist. The audience is no more equipped to honor the "limits" of humanity than the "irresponsible artist." The critic/artist exchange does not mean the participants have equal status. This is a dialogue between the analysand and the analyst. For Spanos, the self-knowledge that the artist seeks must be reached through the detour of the critic. What he suppresses is another possibility: the artist for whom this other is not the critic but the audience:

If freedom means "a departure from," its moral ground, as all existentialists insist, is responsibility in the root sense of answering another and answering for what one says: the obligation, that is, of acknowledging the integrity of the situation, which, above all, consists of the presence of another who is capable of speech.13

Never mind that the audience speaks its approval or disapproval by way of the market.
Never mind that when it buys into the art event, it says yes and when it does not buy it says no. If one responds with the well-known critique of consumerism and advertisement, one also criticizes the critic whose products are advertised whenever they appear in public under the emblem of a publisher. The professionalization of intellectual life is linked to the marketplace irrespective of the intelligentsia's political postures.

The critic/artist dialogue takes the form of spatial relations, that is, in Spanos' terminology, immobilized, hierarchical, oppressive. At worst the critic is the arbiter of culture: the artist and audience are at the mercy of his judgement. At best both the artist and critic are arbiters; the audience is subject to their decisions. This is how Spanos would like for things to be. The condescension toward the audience and its critical prowess is undisguised:

He [the critic] owes this to the writer, whose work invariably has its source in encounter with rather than disinterested contemplation of the world. And he owes it, as I have tried to suggest, to other men, who are always at the mercy of views they do not understand and, more important perhaps, their all-too-human self-deceptive impulse to objectify their dreadful uncertainties in order to make them easier to deal with.14

* * *

Spanos' essay on spatialization was published in 1970, just at the moment literary criticism was making its own claim for validity and significance relative to "creative" works. Before the French invasion in the late Sixties gave criticism its state-of-the-art weaponry, criticism was what went on, mostly meekly, in the academy. Meanwhile, in the streets, a whole "counterculture" was growing: non-Hollywood films became increasingly available to a mainstream audience, independent book publishers began to issue cutting-edge books, and pop music sprouted its own industry of artists and critics. Little wonder the battle-cry of "relevance" began to be heard with increasing
belligerence in the university. Who could have predicted then that terms like deconstruction, texts and semiotics would become part of the jargon of journalists and fad-watching magazines and journals? Who would have foreseen disciples of Derrida, cults of Foucaultians, and hangers-on trailing Barthes to New York discos?

In 1970 this was all still to come. The anxiety that the critic may have been losing his small role in the cultural affairs of the country is present in Spanos' spatialization essay. But armed with the newfangled interest in literary hermeneutics, Spanos is able to point ahead to the elevation of the critical enterprise. Hence his insistence on dialogue between critic and artist. The anxiety and aggression are symptoms of Spanos' realization that this "dialogue" with the contemporary artist is still to come.

Of course, the call for a "creative criticism," as Geoffrey Hartmann put it in *Criticism in the Wilderness* (1980), presupposed that criticism heretofore had been "non-creative" and objective. Combined with a misunderstanding of Derrida's elliptical style (which was meant to underscore the relative—not absolute—autonomy of literary and philosophical texts) this belief has spawned all kinds of pseudo-Derridean writing.

Seven years later criticism has made great strides toward the limelight reserved for "artists" and Spanos seems much more relaxed and self-assured in "Breaking the Circle: Hermeneutics as Dis-closure." As the positive use of the term hermeneutics indicates, the familiar hyphenation points not to Derrida but to Heidegger. This essay continues Spanos' assault against spatial or "essentialist" criticism. It marks Spanos' first attempt to explicate the relationship between his existential hermeneutics and Heidegger's destructive hermeneutics. It is also here that Spanos explores in depth the "dialogic" model; for him it is the model par excellence of the hermeneutical circle.

Before I begin I need to stress the difference that Spanos sees between openness and freedom. Freedom is dialogue; openness is monologue. It does not require a listener. This is why Spanos calls proponents of openness "irresponsible"; there is not an other to whom the speaking artist is responsible. As dialogue, freedom is responsibility. Since
dialogue is also the model for the hermeneutical circle, it is by staying within the circle that one acts freely, that is, responsibly. The circle describes the "limit" of the dialogue, beyond which is "dehumanization."  

Insofar as the dialogic exchange is the way to the "ultimate meaning of being-in-the-world," the answers that arise from this dialogue are provisional. The "ultimate meaning of being in the world" is that it is not ultimate. Meaning does not reside in Frank's aestheticized in and of time. Because Spanos conceives of the dialogue as verbal and oral, he conceives of the dialogue as temporal. Unlike what is written, the spoken and heard are transient. They last only in memory, and as memory is imprecise and unreliable, what lasts is not monumentalized. It is always altered when recalled. Such is Spanos' justification for linking the oral and temporal.

To reverse the epistemological hierarchy that "has valued the eyes over the other senses ever since Plato gave them ontological priority," Spanos must not only assert the priority of the temporality of historical man but must also assert the priority of the temporality of the text. Both "hear" and "speak": thus the "reification of language, transformation of words into image, by the mystified logocentric hermeneutics of Modernist criticism . . . closes off the possibility of hearing the temporality of words, in which the real 'being' of a literary text inheres." The "graspable' icon" of the modernist critic is allowed to emerge "explicitly as verbal text--a text to be heard--from its context in the realm of deposited knowledge" by the existential critic.

This relationship between the existential critic and the literary text is analogous to that between Olson's projective poet and the world. Just as the existential critic must allow himself to hear the text emerging as a verbal event, so that projective poet must "stay inside himself" and hear "through himself . . . the secrets objects share." What is at issue for both is the "fidelity" of listening and the "clarity" of reproducing what one has heard in criticism and poems.
Just as the difference between the art event and critic presupposes a dialogue that alters both, so too the effect of the difference between the art event and poet. This occurs each time a critic reads, a poet writes. The hermeneutical circle links both writer and subject through the loop of interpretation.

Such is the thrust of this essay. The second part of the essay, "Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and the Hermeneutic Circle: Towards a Postmodern Theory of Interpretation as Dis-closure," appeared a year earlier in an anthology on Heidegger edited by Spanos. I read the essays in the order Spanos apparently intended, but I doubt it would have made much difference. The themes in the two works are relatively autonomous, though they do illuminate and reinforce one another.

Perhaps having anticipated criticisms regarding the closure of form in general, and thus the problems the notion of temporal form and the hermeneutical circle might give rise to, Spanos believes he is following Heidegger when he distinguishes the "vicious circle" of spatial thought from the "authentic circle" of existential thought. But Heidegger questions and qualifies the metaphor of the circle itself: "When one talks of the 'circle' in understanding, one expresses a failure to recognize two things: (1) that understanding as such makes up a basic kind of Dasein's Being and (2) that this Being is constituted as a core." If this Being is constituted as a core, and understanding makes up a basic kind of it, then even if one conceives of the core as a point, there is no way to conceive of understanding in terms of a geometric metaphor. Heidegger's understanding is then close to Frank's meaning which shrinks from history in an instant of time. Whereas Frank's meaning arises spontaneously when we apprehend the total form of an art work, Heidegger's understanding arises when we "leap into the 'circle,'" primordially and wholly, so that even at the start of the analysis of Dasein we make sure that we have a full view of Dasein's circular Being."21

For Heidegger, understanding is a totalizing a-historical act that occurs prior to movement along the circle of interpretation. It happens in the instantaneous "leap"
(which may be Kierkegaard's leap of faith). Interpretation is thus partial because it is historical. It never leads to understanding, the "full view of Dasein's circular Being," since this understanding is the precondition of "authentic" interpretation. Following Heidegger here, Spanos says interpretation is "endless"--historical: not simply a fuller but a more problematic and dynamic experience: the concealing/unconcealing, truth/error process of being."22

Now Heidegger's notion that we can have a "full view of Dasein's circular Being" reinscribes Plato's metaphysics of sight and space into this temporal oral system.23 And since we must have this "full view" before the temporal process of interpretive listening can begin, Heidegger's metaphysics of space and sight function as the foundations on which Spanos' metaphysics of temporality and listening rest.

Now it may appear that Spanos and Heidegger share the same views.24 Let me untie the threads a little. Heidegger makes the claim for understanding Dasein's circular Being as the condition for interpretation. But it is Spanos who links interpretation to listening. Spanos has already (in "Breaking the Circle") linked sight and space to metaphysics. In some way, then, Spanos must refute or alter what Heidegger says to avoid having his system dependent on a metaphysics of space and sight:

On the other hand, in 'leaping into the circle,' primordially and wholly, in beginning consciously in the limited and contextual temporal standpoint of being-in-the-world, the interpreter as ek-static and interested or careful Dasein 'understands' being beforehand, not as a derived conceptual proposition, as finalized and spatial totality in which all 'entities . . . can be surveyed at a glance,' but only in a vague, a dim way, as that which has been "covered up" or 'forgotten.'25

Understanding for Spanos diverges from the certainty common to Heidegger and Frank;26 we do not ever have a full view of being. We see dimly and vaguely as through a dark glass. For Spanos, understanding is not totalizing. This is a significant stride forward
since understanding remains open to future revision.

But Spanos' refusal to totalize understanding does not resolve the problem of understanding's atemporality. On the contrary, by rethinking understanding in this way Spanos temporalizes it. We don't see the entities of being in the instant of a glance. This in turn makes understanding a result of the interpretive process, not its precondition. Thus, even though the "whole," the "form," of hermeneutic understanding is not the whole and form of epiphantic understanding, both are necessary for the completion of the hermeneutic circle. Pre-historic metaphysical understanding is the condition of the interpretive process which leads to historic hermeneutical "understanding." And since understanding at the "start" is "vague," and "understanding" at the "end" is "fuller" but not Heidegger's "full view of Dasein's circular Being," Spanos never posits a totality. But since pre-historic understanding is not a part of the interpretative process itself, it resides outside history. In addition, by linking this "preontological" (Spanos' word) understanding to seeing ("dimly") Spanos appears to found interpretive listening on a viewed understanding.

Thus, whereas the metaphysical perspective tends to understand or rather 'misunderstand' being (and understanding) by interestingly negating the originary interest of the interpreter 'on the supposition that it is measuring up to the loftiest rigour of scientific investigation,' the existential/ontological standpoint of phenomenology is 'guided and regulated' (BT, 63, 359, SZ, 314) ... The hermeneutic circle is thus not a vicious circle, despite its presuppositions about being. For at the 'end' of the temporal process of interpretive disclosure the 'whole,' the 'form,' it discovers, to put it mildly, is quite different from the whole, the form, as object of the beginning. It turns out to be 'endless'--historical: not simply a fuller but a more problematic and dynamic experience: the concealing/unconcealing, truth/error process of being.27

The metaphysical perspective misunderstands understanding because it forgets its own
hicricty. This "error" is necessary in order for metaphysics to culminate in the
dream of technological mastery of the world. Metaphysics as spatiality covers over
being as temporality. One understands this vaguely and uncertainly once one views
metaphysics as the covering-over that conceals the truth of temporality (being).28 But
since metaphysics as a priori understanding is the ground for the temporal
"understanding" of being, the "truth" of temporal being is the covering-over of spatial
understanding that knows this truth. And yet one could argue that this prior
understanding is possible only because of our temporal condition. And so on, in a circle.
At bottom, there is no 'ground" that has been covered up. The dialogic movement of
"concealment/unconcealment, truth/error" is the dialogic movement of spatial and
temporal concepts, none of which is more "true" than any other.

One might wonder then why Spanos feels compelled to follow Heidegger and make
understanding a grounded precondition of interpretation. Having historicized the
hermeneutical understanding that follows interpretation, having made understanding
partial and uncertain, it might seem that Spanos could simply have dismissed at the
outside the a priori understanding that lies outside temporality. But without this
epiphantic understanding one never gets to hermeneutical "understanding." The
metaphysical concept of understanding defines a limit, whether rigid (spatial) or
flexible( temporal). For Spanos, this limit is the dialogic process (which excludes the
audience). As for Heidegger, so for Spanos the dialogue as limit guides and regulates.
Doubtless the limits prescribed here are, for Spanos, his conception of
"dehumanization." We know all too well what Heidegger's were. This is why only
metaphysics can "set" borders and limits.29

* * *

Having examined the nuts and bolts of Spanos' hermeneutics, I think it only fair to
look at the way it works as a literary critical methodology. Because Spanos believes in
the dialogic movement of trutty and error, unconcealment and concealment, he claims to

Although his "destruction of *The Waste Land* will not constitute a critique of the poem or of its received interpretations," Spanos' destruction will constitute a critique of the claims to authenticity by those "received interpretations."[^30] And it does so not by shaking off those interpretations that constitute a tradition, but by appropriating and demoting them to the secondary status of the inauthentic in the hierarchical relation authentic/inauthentic. And yet, the distinction itself as well as the value judgment inaugurate the movement of metaphysics, for authenticity and hierarchy depend on preconceived limits. Since these concepts precede and determine the interpretation that follows, they constitute Spanos' a priori understanding of this poem.

Now insofar as Spanos' hermeneutics purport to reverse the traditional hierarchy of metaphysical concepts, it resembles the first movement of deconstruction. It is on the basis of this reversed tradition that the phenomenological reduction can occur:

> Analogously, a destruction of *The Waste Land* will involve a phenomenological reduction--a bracketing, as it were, of the spatial hermeneutic perspective, which is the literary equivalent of metaphysics, to return "to the things themselves," that is, an originative or unprivileged temporal (ek-static) hermeneutic stance before the text as process.^[31]

Two years before in the 1977 essay "hermeneutic" temporality was opposed to "epophantic" spatiality. Now there can be a "spatial hermeneutic perspective" in opposition to a "temporal (ek-static) hermeneutic stance." Standing temporally before a "text as process" is not the same as looking at a text from a certain position ("perspective"). I suppose this means that one stands aware of one's temporality as opposed to believing one stands in the instant of time outside history. Because one is
aware of one's temporality, one cannot "privilege" one's standing. So why, then, bracket the "spatial hermeneutic stance" since it too is a "hermeneutic" and should therefore be "originative or unprivileged" and capable of returning one to "'the things themselves'"? After all, "interpretation" for the New Critics was also a "process," which is why Frank, for instance, insists on the temporality of literature. Spatiality only comes into play as form and meaning after reading. This is why Spanos' notion of an a priori understanding is analogous to Frank's a posteriori form and meaning. Though one is partial while the other is complete, both reside outside temporality in time.

Despite the neutrality "unprivileged" and "bracketing" point to, I suspect that Spanos' temporal hermeneutics are being privileged here:

More specifically, then, a destruction of *The Waste Land* will require *discovering* or *dis-closing* and thus retrieving the be-ing (the process) of the poem that the spatial hermeneutics of the Western literary tradition that culminates in the New Critical poetics of ironic inclusiveness has in the blindness of its insight (to appropriate Paul de Man's phrase) covered over or closed off from view. . . .

Spanos then announces the explicit intent of his destruction of Eliot's poem:

Such a 'phenomenological' destruction, or 'de-construction,' as Jacques Derrida calls it, will disclose, I submit, that *The Waste Land*, far from achieving a privileged status as autonomous object outside of temporal existence, as has been claimed both by its admirers and detractors alike, is in fact a basically **open-ended**, a **historical**, poem that demystifies the reader's traditional, i.e., logocentric, expectations and engages him in history in the mode of dis-covery or dis-closure.

But this emphasis on open-endedness and historicality is problematized by the language of the following paragraph:

If one approaches the poem as a temporal process rather than as a plastic or spatial "object" or, to put it another way, from the beginning rather than from
the end (phenomenologically rather than New Critically—or Structurally), what he will discover is that space or rather the tradition of spatial perception (embodied in the figure of Tiresias) is the problem rather than the solution of the poet-protagonist and that his "mythic method" or, rather, his use of myth is not a logocentric means of dehistoricizing (which, of course, is another way of saying 'dehumanizing') history, but a way of formally and thematically reappropriating, of repossessing, the integrity of historical time.

Earlier I wrote that the radical implications of temporality led to no "ends," so that inasmuch as Spanos posits an end for literature (the "enhancement" of life) he reinscribes a spatial value into hermeneutics. Now since I am arguing that there is no temporality without spatiality, this is nothing for which I criticize Spanos. In the above passage the value of spatiality is signalled by the terms "reappropriating," "repossessing" and "integrity." And despite the qualifying "historical," I include also "time." The problems these words give rise to are enormous. (1) The poet-protagonists' "use of myth" could only valorize temporality if myth were the object of criticism in the poem. Now if it indeed is the object (e.g., Tiresias) of criticism, and temporality is valorized, then (2) one could not possess what is never present because (3) what is absent cannot be defined by the integral. It is true that "historical time" refers to hermeneutical "understanding" (partial), but as I argued above, and as the word "time" (like Eliot's "myth") signals, a priori understanding and a posteriori "understanding" occur before and after temporality.

The Heideggerian themes of appropriation and integrity that Spanos himself reads in the poem strengthen the hands of the New Critics' reading of The Waste Land. And when he writes of the analogous theme of reconciliation in the poem, his prioritizing of temporality appears arbitrary:

Thus, just as the psychological thrust in Eliot's poetry is towards the reconciliation of thought and feeling (the psychic agents of the objective and
subjective selves), so the historical thrust is towards the reconciliation of human life in time and being, motion and stillness, a reconciliation, however, in which temporality (and motion), despite Eliot's ambiguous nostalgia for lost origins, is ontologically prior to being (and stillness). But the prioritizing of temporality is not ontological at all. It turns out that its priority is an ethical necessity:

a phenomenological/existential understanding of history and of time is more original than the derived or spatialized view of the Western ontotheological tradition [because it views] . . . a centerless and contingent universe which nevertheless discloses or opens up to the interested . . . man . . . the possibility— but only and always the possibility—that history, however, "endless" both past and future, is nevertheless meaningful. . . .

By emphasizing only the possibility of a meaningful history, Spanos pretends to no metaphysical claims about the meaning of history. Thus the "interested" man stands open to what the uninterested man--who believes history is meaningful or meaningless--is closed to. But if one can only understand this beforehand—which is to say, metaphysically—one would have had to say that history is possibly meaningful or meaningless. That is, since we understand beforehand metaphysically, it would not be more metaphysical (as in a little pregnant) to begin in the understanding that history is meaningful but that it is possibly--only and always--meaningless. My question: is there any particular reason Spanos believes interested man begins in the understanding that history is meaningless?

I must return to Spanos' essay on spatialization. In the midst of his attack on the "irresponsible artist" Spanos decires the critics who refuse to judge works of art qualitatively and instead believe, for example, that "Leni Riefenstahl's The Triumph of the Will is as good as Thomas Mann's The Magic Mountain; William Burrough's Naked Lunch is as good as William Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury; and Andy Warhol's
signature is as good as T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets.*" All this because the critics are "fearful lest in the process of offering a judgment, they miss the point and fall headlong onto the spikes of 'squareness.'" This may well have been true for some critics. But what if other critics refused evaluation in the name of openness and not freedom? The very next paragraph of the Spanos essay begins by saying just this: "In the name of openness, freedom is denied." I have already explained that Spanos defines freedom as responsibility to the other of the dialogue. And that for Spanos this other is the critic. But the facts of the matter are that these "open" artists not only have others in their audiences but quite often in their audience there are other critics. They, too, are proponents of "freedom," but one that has escaped Spanos' freedom. They are not a part of the academy. Not only does Spanos want to privilege critics in the dialogue with the artist but he also wants to privilege the accredited critics.

Perhaps even in 1979, then, at the time of the essay on *The Waste Land*, Spanos believed that the cultural and social upheavals of the past century had made history "meaningless," and especially so for the academic critic watching his role in history dwindle. And so, for him, the history that has passed and the history to come are only and possibly meaningful. No doubt this possibility will depend on the resurrection of the critic.

I return to the essay on *The Waste Land*. Everything else here depends on the ethical imperative to prioritize temporality. The balance of Spanos' "reading" of the poem depends, however, on spatial metaphors. Moreover, everything he says in the reading--except for the moments when he insists that temporality is prior to spatiality--shows how temporal interpretation leads to spatial understanding. This "space" is not simply that of a poem or novel; rather, it becomes the form in which history emerges at any moment as "meaningful" (i.e., it has a "pattern"): 

For the dis-closive function of the historical sense involves simultaneously the interpreter's continual destruction (or de-mythologizing) of the text . . . and dis-
covery of at least the suggestion of a more originative temporal continuity, a
more primordial underlying pattern (being) that pulls a senseless and erosive
circularity into spiral shape, thus linearizing recurrence or, more accurately,
progressively deepening the interpreter's original, preontological,
understanding of being—without grounding direction in the causal sequence of
positivistic or clocktime rationalism.39

Loosely translated into the language of reader-response theory, this means that the
interpreter's (read: reader's) understanding of a text functions as a horizon under which
hypotheses are made and discarded as one approaches what cannot be reached: the
horizon ("total" understanding). This interpretive movement is temporal and spatial
regardless of what the interpreter or text "intends":

We may realize, rather, that it [the poem] constitutes an explorative seeking
(periplus) to reunite both poles of the antinomy; more specifically—to
emphasize the ontological priority of temporality in the quest for form—to
discover form in process, essence in existence, being in be-ing.40

To seek spatial form in temporality does not mean that the former is derived from the
latter. But since

this interpretation is grounded in the temporal discovery of an emergent
"spiral" (recurrent-linear) motion in the circular structural surface of the
poem41

I can't say the opposite either: that temporality in spatial form means the latter is prior
to the former.

... *

Insofar as it constitutes an implicit critique of the kind of existential hermeneutics that
can be derived from Heidegger's work, Jacques Derrida's explicit deconstruction of a
substantial number of Heideggerian concepts may, for some readers, take on the
appearance of a resuscitation of metaphysics.42 Rejecting the criterion of speculation--
which looks to or for that which can never appear to sight (that is, to empiricism)—in favor of a logic that shuttles back and forth between empiricist and idealist positions, Derrida elevates the value of play as a counter to the metaphysical value of work.

The gesture often associated with deconstruction is Derrida's distinctions between what an author wants to say and what his text does say. This difference is what the late Paul de Man meant by entitling his first major work on literary theory *Blindness and Insight* (1971). This difference animates Derrida's readings. It was apparent in his first major publication, a long introduction to Husserl's text on the phenomenological foundations of geometry:

> When Husserl . . . devotes a few lines to the production and evidence of geometrical sense as such and its own proper content, he will do so only after having determined the general conditions of its Objectivity and the Objectivity of ideal objectivities. Thus, only retroactively and on the basis of its results can we illuminate the pure sense of the subjective praxis which has engendered geometry. . . . the primordial sense of every intentional act is only its final sense, i.e., the constitution of an object (in the broadest sense of these terms).43

What seems to be the originary is what is inferred from what seems to be secondary. Only and always—or, in the terms of analytic philosophy, sufficiently and necessarily—the secondary is primary, the primary secondary. Were deconstruction to stop here—as some believe it does—Derrida's critics that accuse him of elevating writing over speech, absence over presence, belatedness over primordiality, etc., would be justified. Deconstruction at this stage—and the American domestication of deconstruction into "deconstructionist," "deconstructionism," remains arrested here—would simply be a metaphysical gesture with the other hand. But—and this will need to be said more than once—deconstruction is affirmative. Causes are both causes and effects; effects are both effects and causes. Without this "vicious circle" of metaphysics no knowledge, science, philosophy or literature would be possible. It is thus tracing the circle again and again
that metaphysics is both affirmed and "transcended." Under deconstruction, however, this transcendence is only an effect of the movement around the circle of metaphysics. To put it crudely, in philosophical texts these effects will have the appearance of rhetorical effects and in literary texts they will have the appearance of epistemological effects. This does not mean that philosophy is a type of literature or that literature is a type of philosophy. Rather, deconstruction works at the borders of the "type" set up by metaphysics in order to "demonstrate" the metaphysical necessity of this "limit."

The primordial and derived is analogous to the ontological and epistemological, and as I wrote earlier, whatever the status of the ontological, it can only be posited or discovered by an epistemology. For example, if I reread Spanos' statement that "this interpretation is grounded in the temporal discovery of an emergent 'spiral' (recurrent-linear) motion in the circular structural surface of the poem" through Derrida's reversal of the primary and secondary, it is clear that this "view" of the poem is only possible from outside the poem. This may seem obvious and banal, but for the hermeneuticist there is no "outside" the poem since the "spiral" of interpretation encircles the words on the page and "words" in the head. Without the "background" of the "circular structural surface of the poem" one could never "see" the spiral motion emerge from the poem. This "background" is spatial and thus, for Spanos, metaphysical.

And yet from the basis of this metaphysicality, one discovers temporality emerging.

Only from the "outside" of the poem is knowledge of the poem as a poem possible. And as Derrida argues in his discussion of Husserl's geometric "space," the inside/outside difference defines the form of the object of knowledge:

Just as one's own body, as the primordial here and zero-point for every objective determination of space and spatial motion, is not itself in motion in this space as an object, so--analogously--the earth, as primordial body, as the found-body (Boden Korper) from which a Copernican determination of the earth as body-object becomes possible, is not itself one body among others in the mechanical
system. Primordially, the Earth moves no more than our body moves and leaves the permanence of its here, grounded in a present. The Earth therefore knows the rest of the object (rest as 'mode of motion'), but Rest starting from which motion and rest can appear and be though as such, the Rest of a ground and a horizon in their common origin and end. . . . There is then a science of space, insofar as its starting point is not in space.44

As long as one speaks and thinks in terms of geometric figures that one can see from some vantage point "outside" one submits to the mechanistics of metaphysics. This goes for spirals and circles; it also goes for other figures: nets, tissues, textures, etc. This is why ils n'y pas de hors-texte.45

But if one is always in a text, this means that appeals to truth, authenticity, originality, etc., are appeals to what lies beyond the text even if texts are used as "proof" of what lies beyond them. For example, Spanos concedes that one of the reasons we can now read The Waste Land as a process instead of a product is due to the publication of the original manuscript which "demonstrates" that the so-called "mythic method" was "discovered on the way." The original manuscript (and is it the only original? Spanos does not ask) apparently precedes the finished manuscript (apparently because it may be that there are undiscovered revisions that followed the "final" manuscript). The "final" copy, along with subsequent statements by Eliot, lead readers to read the poem spatially. But now the publication of the original manuscript allows us to read the poem temporally, that is, "authentically." But since the original manuscript appeared after the final manuscript, it justifies the historicity of interpretation regardless of when it was written. Why, then, are the subsequent statements by Eliot about the poem not also valid, especially if we are not certain, for example, that the composition of Eliot's review of Ulysses follows the completion of The Waste Land? How does Spanos know the "mythic method" was discovered en route, especially since Eliot's interest in myth precedes the writing of the poem? On the grounds of temporality alone, is not the
original manuscript derivative with respect to the final manuscript because it was read only after the final manuscript? If one wishes to assert the priority of the dates of composition, if one turns to here to objective time that wrests priority from the historical interpreter, is this not a concession to metaphysics as conceived by Heidegger and Spanos? Inasmuch as the original manuscript was apparently written before the final manuscript but appeared to the public after the final manuscript, what exactly is the temporal status of the original? If one brackets its "objective" temporality--when it was written--and appropriates it hermeneutically, the contradictions remain: what is original is what appeared after. If one brackets one's historicity--when the original appeared to one--and interprets it epophantically, the contradictions remain: what appeared after is what is original. What is de facto and what is de jure are confounded. The knowledge of temporality and spatiality are one and the same in their attachments to metaphysics.46

Now space and spatiality, time and temporality, are not metaphysical in themselves. If they have nonetheless functioned as metaphysical concepts, this is because they always appear in the classical metaphysical posture: one atop the other divided by the bar of a limit.

Difference--and not temporality or spatiality--would be one name for the movement of the trace of the trace. For since this movement escapes the arresting forms of metaphysics, this movement cannot be properly named. It can never appear as an object of knowledge.47

...  

If movement is the difference of the trace of the trace, then this movement cannot be reduced to the metaphysics of reversibility and irreversibility since to do so would be to posit temporality as either reversible or irreversible. This reduction also turns temporality into a "being" that moves forward (irreversible) or forward-or-backward (reversible).
For hermeneuticists like Spanos, the irreversibility of temporality is a crucial tenet. Irreversibility is necessitated by the possibility of the return of the same and the impossibility of the return of the identical. But as I have argued, there is no return of the same either. The metaphysical understanding that initiates interpretation is not the same as the hermeneutic understanding that follows interpretation. Irreversibility turns out to be more radical than Spanos conceived of or desired in the three essays I examined. Irreversibility turns out to collide with reversibility, annihilating both. What is left is movement that escapes the notions of "before" and "after."

For example, the physical sciences teach us that there are several temporalities at various levels of existence. For example, at the level of thermodynamics the reversibility of events is not uncommon. Reversible here also means the return of the same (not the identical). For example, a solid substance may dissolve in a liquid and then condense into a solid again in the liquid, but the second solid is not identical to the first. It is only the same. Now it is obvious that the "same" refers to a pre-existing category called a "solid state." This category comes into existence by way of the laws of philosophy and science. The laws set limits. So we have here a series of interrelated forms--laws, categories, "states"--that support the tenets of reversibility.

But if the historicity of the observer is not bracketed but becomes part of any scientific observation, then reversibility becomes so radicalized that is becomes useless to speak of reversibility or irreversibility. For the laws that seemed to have supported either reversibility or irreversibility turn out to also be "devoid of a time sense." And what I have said about reversible thermodynamic events also applies to reversible subatomic events, entropy, asymmetric time, and any number of modes of what appears to be directions of temporality. And once a direction of temporality is destroyed, cause-effect and part-whole relationships become impossible to decipher. The terms themselves become inadequate.

It would appear then that the idea of temporality as either reversible or irreversible
at any level of existence spatializes movement. This means that once a relationship to
one's past or future is conceived of as irreversible or reversible one has introduced a
concept of space into the relationship. It may be that the idea of "relationship"
presupposes spatiality. If "relationship" designates the historicity of the interested
person in Spanos' system, then its ethical analogue is "responsibility." Both presuppose
a spatial relationship--or, in Spanos' terms, an irreversible temporal relationship--
that is nevertheless different from Frank's spatial form. Spanos' relationship is open-
ended; Frank's is bounded on all "sides."

History, temporality, spatiality, etc. would all be other names for movement.
Inasmuch as they are meant to direct movement, they are metaphors. Metaphor would be
the general vehicle that carries the sense of motion from movement to a myriad of tenors:
history, temporality, etc.

Now if one considers the array of physical sciences--astronomy, physics, biology,
chemistry, etc.--the objects of these sciences are conceived in terms of movement. And
one of the major divisions--I won't say the "first"--within these sciences of movement
occurs with regard to the human observer: the distinction between life and non-life.
Now the metaphor of life can only come about when one has begun to think about between
what seems to not move (e.g., the sky, stones, man-made objects) and those things that
move. This is not yet a "biology" since it has yet to conceive a "thanatology." I do not
know if we can say which of these made its appearance first. But I think it is clear that
one studies "biology" only after having determined the limits of life. As our abilities to
observe the details of movement in all of physical existence improves, it becomes clear
that motion cannot be the differential factor: hence the "soul," "spirit," etc. This is why
the non-human life forms have always been notoriously difficult for theologians. But
not just for them. For the secular, the word "life" itself has not only come to mean the
difference between the living and non-living, but the mysterious whatever that makes
the living living. The tautology of this thinking obscures the metaphoricity of the term
“life.”

In biology and theology this metaphor has a specific name: the image. For the metaphor of life depends on resemblance, similitude and likeness for both. For biologists what is alive is what resembles us. And for theologians the image governs the link between the human and divine (Jewish, Greek, Asian, African, etc.). And regardless of how complex one imagines this image (e.g., life as a function of self-description systems), one can always find its analogue in that which one has determined as non-living. With the exception, of course, of "the soul."

The soul stands outside movement; it can never come to a stop (death). But it is not dead. It stands between life and death. Analogously, Spanos' and Heidegger's preontological understanding and hermeneutical "understanding" stand outside the temporality of the interpretative process. Analogously, Frank's "meaning" stands outside the temporal process of the interpretative process in the image of "irony." Such are the closures of these sundry interpretative practices.

Without goals, without value, without shape or direction, movement is that which is always suppressed, directed or shaped.

Movement is openness. If I reject Spanos' "freedom" for a freedom that is yet responsible, that is because this freedom responds to not only what has yet to appear (Spanos' historical man), but it also responds affirmatively to what is already here. For me, this openness to the art of this historical epoch means that the term "art" is always unidentifiable except as the non-identifiable. This open art extends the dialogue to a polylogue; it is responsible but unbounded. That there are in fact boundaries only underscores my dedication to art that accepts limits and art that extends these limits until they are only imposed from within the individual limitations of each artist.

Could it be said then that I am "open" to all that falls short of dehumanization even if I have yet to define dehumanization? Since dehumanization as "irresponsibility" presupposes the limit of a dialogue and thus the exclusion of those outside the dialogic
circle, the question's form already determines an answer that accepts Spanos' limitations. The inhuman or de-human presupposes the human. The terror of openness-like that of free speech--is that it remains open, and I remain open in it, to a future that will not be foreclosed.
NOTES


3 Spanos 87.

4 Spanos 88.

5 This distinction operates throughout all these essays, but is defined as such in yet a fifth essay: William V. Spanos, "Modern Drama and the Aristotelian Tradition: The Formal imperatives of Absurd Time," Contemporary Literature Summer (1971) 345-72.

6 Spanos 88.

7 Spanos 88-89, 90-91.

8 Spanos 89.


10 Spanos 90.


12 Spanos 101.

13 Spanos 102.

14 Spanos 102.

15 Spanos 102.

16 Spanos, "Breaking the Circle: Hermeneutics as Disclosure," 424.
17 Spanos 445.

18 Spanos 443.

19 Spanos 445.

20 Olson, "Projective Verse," 156.


22 Spanos 121.

23 The references to seeing, spacing, geometry dominate Spanos' essays under examination here. References to hearing and speaking are few and far between despite the assertion of their primordiality. The same can be said for temporality. That these metaphors proliferate when Spanos analyzes specific texts--e.g., Eliot's poems--seems lost on Spanos, at least in these essays.

24 In what follows I don't mean to suggest that Heidegger does not link speaking and listening to temporality and being. But in this limited essay I am most concerned with how Spanos builds his hermeneutics atop Heidegger's.

25 Spanos 121.

26 Meaning is Frank's analogue to Heidegger's understanding because, like the latter, it refers to a comprehension of a totality. This meaning is linked to form.

27 Spanos 121.

28 Again it is this notion of the "real" as the "covered-over" that links Spanos' hermeneutics to the anlayises of Freud, Marx, etc.

29 Which is not to say that one can conceive of an absolute openness. This critique presupposes the possibility of an openness relative to what I have analyzed as Spanos' various closures. Nonetheless this chapter ends with the invocation of an idealized (i.e., unbounded) openness that serves as my "end."


31 Spanos 231.

32 Spanos 230.

33 Spanos 231.

34 Spanos 231.

35 Spanos 232.
36 Spanos 237-38.


38 Spanos 102.

39 Spanos 238.

40 Spanos 242.

41 Spanos 244.

42 After almost a quarter of a century this theme continues to surface in criticism of Derrida by those who have adopted his "tools" as well as those who reject them. After repeated attempts to "explain" himself, the French philosopher is beginning to lose patience. Truth to tell, this impatience—which takes the form of sarcasm—is evident as early as *De Grammatologie* (1967, 24) and was still present five years later in *Positions* (1972, 52). One need only consult the de Man debate in recent issues of *Critical Inquiry* to see that misunderstanding of deconstruction and Derrida's other work has taken on grandiose proportions with popularization. And so has Derrida's temper.


44 Derrida 85.


46 Spanos 234-35. Temporality and spatiality are metaphysical once they serve as grounds, origins, etc. Derrida thus makes the explicit point that his tools—difference, trace, etc.—are not concepts, i.e., foundations. See the essay "Differance" in both *Writing and Difference* and *Margins of Philosophy*.

47 In what follows I attempt to undermine the foundations of temporality "as such" by offering a criticism of the concept of "life." For Heidegger, Spanos and a number of philosophers, literary theorists and scientists, temporality comes into "being" by way of humanity. More crudely (and perhaps inaccurately), one way humans distinguish themselves from other life-forms is by offering up either the "soul" or, what comes down to the same thing, consciousness of our own mortality, i.e. our temporality.


51 The idea of living systems as self-descriptive belongs to Howard Pattee (89-92). And despite Pattee's appeal to von Newman's criterion of "real time, space, matter, energy relationships" (92) as necessary for construction of living systems, my critique of these notions should demonstrate that Pattee's appeal here is strictly metaphysical and, more to the point, clarifies little.
CHAPTER FIVE

I will risk it: the opening of the postmodernist experiment continues today in the names of oral performance and language writing.¹ This is a risk because I could mount a compelling argument to show just the opposite.² But the nature of this risk is not simply a matter of being "wrong." The risk lies in the forms where I place the opening: orality and writing. Insofar as both movements tend toward essentializing their modes of poetry, I risk valorizing that as open what the preceding chapters have shown, I dare say, define closure. But since my thesis is that poems are both open and closed, I will demonstrate that the opening of oral performance and language writing extends postmodernism only in specific limited ways. My "examples" are David Antin and Barrett Watten.

I first examine the critical response to the talk poems of David Antin. The thesis of this section is that Antin's critical acclaim is the result of his commentators' tendencies to idealize his project. Occasionally Antin himself lends credence to this idealization. I then examine several of the poems from Antin's first collection of talk poems, Talking at the Boundaries, with occasional comments on his second collection, Tuning.³

The three critics who have written at length on Antin are Marjorie Perloff, Henry Sayre and Charles Altieri. Though Perloff concerns herself with Antin in The dance of the intellect, her most extended treatment of the poet occurs in an earlier book, The Poetics of Indeterminacy. Henry Sayre's major contribution is an essay in Contemporary Literature while Altieri has a long review of Tuning in College English.⁴

Perloff sets her task as the proof of form in Antin's poetry "precisely because the usual objection is that Antin's poetry doesn't have any."⁵ Perloff doesn't say who usually raises objections, but it is probable that she means critics and poets with whom she shares certain poetic values. Perloff does not consider that it is those values from which Antin's work is a radical departure. Rather than follow Antin in his adventure, she plans to rein him in in the name of form. Despite the title and thesis of her book, The Poetics
of Indeterminancy, Perloff subordinates indeterminancy to the determinate.

As I've shown in my analyses of Frank and Spanos, literary criticism functions as the
closure of a literature conceived as problematically open, and so, in need of explication.
Even when process and openness are held up as positive values, they remain subject to
what is upheld even higher: product and closure. Thus, Perloff, comparing Antin's
prose talk poems to "ordinary" prose, argues that the associative rhythm of Antin's
prose cannot be scanned for "key ideas" as one might do with ordinary prose. This is
because "the fragmentation of phrasing, the suspension of meaning, and the repetition of
words, always in a slightly altered context, preclude the possibility of deriving key
'ideas' from this text or summarizing its contents. There is no shortcut; I must simply
read the whole thing." The significance of this assertion lies not in its meaning;
Perloff, after all, has only paraphrased the romantic commonplace that poetry cannot be
paraphrased. What is important here is the way Perloff seems to valorize process. If
process is valued, it is not for itself. It is process-on-the-way-to-product, even if the
"product" in question is not a well-wrought urn but analogically associable "non-key
'ideas'": "The talk poem incorporates as many different threads as will allow it to retain
its improvisatory quality, yet those threads are all relational."7

I am not arguing that Perloff is inventing relations and connections where none exist.
As we shall see when I discuss specific talk poems, form and closure are indeed features
of Antin's work. The point is that Perloff not only ignores but also devalues the
openings, the threads that cannot be related to one another. But she also devalues the talk
poems that are too closed and too formed:

At one extreme, the talk may be too linear, too concerned with the exposition of a
particular theme . . . At the other extreme, the diverse materials--childhood
memories, anecdotes about art shows, speculations on Homeric narrative, and so
on--may fail to generate the necessary cross references . . . The continuity
essential to the associative rhythm is not always maintained.8
Why does Perloff speak of those places at the "extremes" in terms of failure--too opened or too closed? Because in both instances the work of the critic is foiled. As Altieri notes in his essay, some of Antin's talk poems are so explicit that commentary is superfluous. But of course Altieri's commentary continues for several more pages. Even when the poet has both said and explained what he said, it is still incumbent upon the critic to at least explain how the poet said, how the poet explained what he said. The question of "how" is primarily a question of stylistics, and since most critics still find their most satisfying moments in the exposition of themes, ideas and values, this attenuation of the critical project strikes Perloff, at least, as impoverishing. The "extremes" of literature--the obvious and the obscure--threaten neither literature nor literariness; they simply reshape and redefine the limits. But these extremes are dangerous to the traditional critic, for by rendering explication superfluous or inept, they challenge the basis for the existence of criticism.

* * *

Much of what I have said about the complicity between the concepts of openness and closure is anticipated by Henry Sayre in "David Antin and the Oral Poetic Movement." For example, he argues that despite its claims to open up contemporary poetry, to "allow for all poetic possibilities," as against the "forms of categorical thinking," the oral poetry movement, by rejecting categorical thinking, is itself "exclusionary," yet "one more prescriptive poetics." Moreover, the desire for acategorical thinking is predicated on the desire for future totalities, "some vague notion of epistemological wholeness." The oral poetry movement is thus analogous to American ego psychologists who idealize the notion of "'the whole person.'" Yet this "desire to achieve poetic wholeness" is always "at odds with the poetics of displacement, process and change."10

Sayre goes on to contrast the oral poetics of Jerome Rothenberg with those of David Antin. For Sayre, Rothenberg remains committed to the poetic aesthetics of New Criticism and the mainstream of contemporary poetry while Antin tends to
"problematize" the relationship between speech and writing, non-poetry and poetry, etc. In effect, Antin's talk poems, says Sayre, are undecideable, a term he borrows from Perloff.¹¹

Sayre argues that Rothenberg "rejects the limiting and restrictive field offered him by academic poetics, [and] he replaces it with another essentially restrictive and limiting field, one admittedly larger than before, but bounded nonetheless."¹² Note how Sayre conflates the aesthetic and political here. Rothenberg is mainstream because his poetics mimic the exclusionary gesture of the poetics he challenges. Sayre implies that a "politically correct" marginal poetic would include those central poetics that have effectively marginalized it. If this smacks of bad faith on Sayre's part, it is because Sayre does not consider the strategic effects of Rothenberg's closure. For Rothenberg, it is a question of consolidating and marshalling resources to combat the dominant mainstream. What mainstream and marginal poetics have in common is their mutual apotheosis of the poem, spoken or written, process or product:

Both academic poetics and oral poetics are ultimately founded on the notion of the poem--whether situated in speech or written as text--as privileged because somehow transcendent. The one may claim to possess and hold the transcendental (it is this capture which makes the poem so precious), while the other claims to possess the transcendental only briefly and then lose it. But for the one, art is the manifestation of, for the other the process of, arriving at the same place--metaphysical wholeness. This strain runs through almost all American poetics--old and new--and it accommodates all strategies, written and oral.

"Or almost all."¹³ With this qualification, Sayre turns to the one person he believes has overcome the metaphysics of transcendentalism: David Antin. Antin avoids the temptation to transcend by shuttling back and forth between the lures of speech and writing. For Sayre, this is what it means to "problematize" their relationship. Unlike Rothenberg's anti-writing oral poetics, "Antin's counter-poetics does not so much ban
the written, the coercive and the literal as it subsumes them." Like Rothenberg, Antin is committed as any to the fundamental distinction between oral and literary cultures, and again, here [Antin's talk poem 'the sociology of art'], the oral culture is imaged as fluid and free while the literal culture is inflexible and authoritarian. But rather than submitting to the automatism of hierarchizing, "Antin's talk poems are founded on the dream of keeping the interchange of such oppositions alive. They do not operate by reversals but by a kind of dialectical play." Derrida is not very far from us here--Sayre quotes him approvingly as the phrase "dialectical play" suggests. The hidden opposition here is to Hegel's dialectic of work, which works toward its own dissolution into the conflict-free zone of synthesis.

But it becomes clear that Antin's "dialectical play" is not play at all; it too works. After giving several examples of Antin's discursive "play," Sayre summarizes Antin's work:

Most of Antin's most successful work moves through a discursive, purposively flat mode . . . , then into a narrative which culminates in what, for lack of a better word, I'd like to call the new epiphany. That is, it possesses the epiphany's intensity, its sense of critical immediacy, but it lacks the classic epiphany's broadly metaphysical and deeply psychological overtones.

But then Sayre adds this:

But, most importantly, the new epiphany is not the private revelation of a privileged point of view, but implicates us all in its vision, actually requires our participation in it.

What is this community of participation if not "broadly metaphysical and deeply psychological"? In requiring our participation, in establishing the circle of interpretation between text and reader, this new epiphany is yet another version of "metaphysical wholeness."
As all three of Antin's critics acknowledge, his talk poems are generally structured around a series of variations of and repetitions on a set of themes. Sayre's new epiphany is simply the spiraling effect of these turns around a common center. This "effect" is consistent with "dialectical play" since the possibility of variation and repetition is also the possibility of play. But the metaphor of the spiral (a metaphor justified because these poems contain a "center") is more consistent with dialectical work since the arcs--curving inwardly or outwardly, writing or speech--point to a final destination: that toward which the dialectic works its way. And yet the spiral is also the metaphor of a certain limited "openness." Antin's talk poems are totalizing--and thus metaphysical--only to the extent they require "our participation."

But this requirement is not one we need answer. And it is one certain readers could never answer even if they wanted to do so. For not everyone who reads or hears Antin would understand that he or she is required to participate: many no doubt would just sit and stew or throw up their hands in frustration. And some no doubt would read or listen uncritically, impressionistically. There are other ways to read and listen than those Sayre supposes.

* * *

In "The Postmodernism of David Antin's Tuning," Charles Altieri opens by discussing the two opposed modes of what he reluctantly calls postmodern poetry. On the one hand, there is a postmodernism that offers a return to the lyrical tradition of Romanticism as an antidote to the obscurantist strategies of modernism and its descendants: these Altieri dubs the neoromantics. On the other hand, there is a postmodernism that extends the modernist anti-mimetic critique of bourgeois culture by radically parodic collages and disjunctions: these Altieri calls experimentalists. And, of course, there are more postmodernisms between these "pressure points" of contemporary poetics. For Altieri, Tuning demonstrates that Antin's poetics (or anti-poetics) satisfy the conflictual demands of the two extremes poles of postmodernism:
With the conservatives [the neoromantics], he insists on an art that addresses the concerns of "common life" and concentrates on feelings that do not depend on elaborate and evasively self-sustaining formal constructs . . . Yet Antin also responds to the experimentalist imperative--not simply by elaborating a new genre but by adapting and altering the critical and constructivist dimensions of Modernist practice. He adapts the critical dimension of his heritage primarily through his way of calling attention to the nature of his medium.20

Inasmuch as this last sentence echoes Antin's own definition of modernism,21 Altieri is obliged to display the characteristic of Antin's project that aligns it with modernism: the self-conscious idealization of the medium. The crux of Altieri's argument for Antin bears on an important distinction. Unlike the modernist idealization of media which dramatized the tensions between "the comprehensiveness of purity of art and the dull confusions of ordinary life," Antin idealizes the instrument most "basic to every area of common life--the process of tuning as we talk." For Altieri,

Speech is flexible and intricate enough to reveal in the process of self-scrutiny a powerful version of the constructivist values that lead Modernism to its exaltation of art, but now as values that allow no heroic melodrama. Attention to the activity of tuning locates another version of the compositional powers promised in the most radical of Constructivist projects; it requires complex readjustments in our sense of the personal and the impersonal since speech makes us aware of how much the individual subject depends upon communal resources; and, most important, it allows Antin to transform Modernist ideals of art as direct testimony rather than commentary, of display rather than reference, into an elaborate demonstration of who one becomes in the very process of tuning.3

What had sustained highly abstract experiments becomes the basis for acts that are radically personalized without succumbing to the temptations of subjectivist
psychologizing.\textsuperscript{22}  

So ends the first part of Altieri's essay, and if I have quoted him extensively, it is because I wanted to show how the weight of this section bears down on Antin's modernist roots. In truth, Antin's formal strategies are all proto-modernist. What makes him not a proto-modernist, for Altieri, is that these strategies are founded on something we all have in common--speech. This is why Altieri has no problem with Antin's idealization of talking--the process of tuning--since it valorizes what most of us regularly do. Not everyone writes poetry, but almost everyone speaks. Altieri's argument depends, then, on two issues: (1) that the modernist elaboration of the poem is a collage of "composite sites that elicit psychic powers so intense and complex that they create elaborate and powerful tensions between the comprehensiveness or purity of art and the dull confusions of ordinary life,"\textsuperscript{23} and (2) that the idealization of the movement of speech as a process of tuning satisfies "Wordsworth's dream that the poet can be simply a person talking to other persons."\textsuperscript{24}

Aside from elaborating Antin's modernist characteristics, Altieri does devote time and space to Antin's relationship to the neoromantic and experimental poles of contemporary poetry. It is unequivocally a relationship of negations: Antin's refusals are themselves eloquent gestures. The critical energies informing them depend on a deep antagonism to the two basic forms of narcissism characterizing our Romantic lyrical traditions--the narcissism of sensibility that establishes the poet as a delicate recording instrument planted in the psyche to trace movements which a general audience can only hope to receive second-hand, and the narcissism of style that reinforces the claims of sensibility by insisting on the emotional force of elegant diction and elaborate formal patterning, thereby often confusing artfulness with perception. In their place Antin concentrates on the capacity of speech to explore and take responsibility
for resources more deeply and more generally embedded in our lives.25

I hope to show in my readings of the talk poems that Antin's work extends both the narcissism of sensibility and the narcissism of style by what I will call the narcissism of speech. Since narcissism in general can be defined by what it excludes, one might wonder who is excluded by the valorization of speech. I refer to the speech-impaired. Just as not everyone can write (e.g., the paralyzed), so not everyone speaks. But even on Altieri's own terms, Antin does not satisfy Wordsworth's dream; he repeats it. Far from being simply a person talking to other persons, Antin follows in the tradition of American poetry and audiences: a poet talking to other artists (a great number of whom are themselves poets), critics and assorted hangers-on. Although I follow Altieri by employing the term narcissism, I want to emphasize that nothing I've written in this paragraph is essentially pejorative from my perspective. Sayre and Altieri are both aware of the naivete of Wordsworth's dream. For them, Antin's "tuning" represents an on-going process that never achieves the "perfect pitch" of explicitness with an ideal audience. But the metaphor of tuning reveals Antin's desire for this ideal state. This desire is coupled with an "antagonism" to those poetics that lack the desire to move toward this ideal state. Antin too repeats the exclusionary gesture.

Sayre and Altieri share with Antin this desire and dismissal. But why dismiss what one has criticized for being dismissive? What one generally hears and reads from poets and critics that essentialize modes (speech or writing) is the echo of a complaint centuries old: there are too many people writing. The poets generally start saying this after having been inducted into the ranks of critical respectability.

One way to get into Altieri's text is to look at what he explicitly chooses to ignore: how Antin relates his "speech acts" to their written transcriptions. In a footnote Altieri explains that he intends to ignore two issues surrounding Antin's talk poems: (1) "the substantial differences between the performances as spoken and what Antin calls the scores which we get as printed texts" and (92) the "difficulty [Antin has] . . . finding a
notation for the life speech gives his performance." Altieri refers here to Antin's typographical stylings, what Altieri derisively dubs "Cummingsism."26

Altieri says he will ignore these issues because Perloff and Sayre have sufficiently treated them in their commentaries. But it may be that Altieri chooses to ignore these issues because a discussion of them would force him to realize that the written texts are not ancillary to the talks. He would see that the texts are not mere transcriptions but, because they are substantially different, are performances in and of themselves. This would mean that Altieri's entire focus here on tuning as a process of speech is a serious distortion of Antin's project.

Note, however, that the issue of Antin's written texts is not a function of what Antin himself wants to do. He admits, says Altieri, that he is not happy with his written texts. However elaborate Antin's strategies for transcribing his talks, he can never fully reproduce--in any sense--the full speech because neither speech nor writing are full, that is, identical to themselves. Nonetheless I believe Antin comes as close to reproducing speech as one can: he uses no capitalizations, no punctuation, just words and spacings (to indicate pauses). If, as Altieri claims, his talks satisfy Wordsworth's dream of the poet as a person simply talking to other persons, then the format of his texts satisfy Olson's dream of field composition. And yet it takes a while to get used to reading these texts. For example, I sometimes stumble over constructions like "were" which means either "were" or "we're." This is the kind of difficulty one encounters when one reads transcribed dialect like, as one example, Black English. Black students can whip off strings of dialect that may be incomprehensible to academics (think of the stunning virtuosity of rap artists). Yet, if the dialect is transcribed into written texts the academics will at least be able to read it with little difficulty while the students will stumble.

On the basis of the above, one might be tempted to assume that Antin's written texts are directed at an exclusive audience while his oral performances are meant for a more
general audience; writing is what academics do while speaking is what almost everybody
does. But despite Altieri's reductionism, there are many kinds of talking, and some
forms of talking are as different from one another as talking is different from writing.
Only by suppressing these differences of talking can Altieri hold up Antin as the latest
coming of Wordsworth's dream: "simply a person talking to other persons." There are
no "persons." There are carpenters, women, introverts, Germans, redheads, blacks,
etc., but there are no persons. David Antin is a trained linguist who talks in museums,
libraries, art spaces, poetry centers, etc. And he talks about art, linguistics,
economics, sociology, philosophy, etc. And the people who come to listen to Antin are
generally no different from the people one often sees at art shows, poetry readings and
other cultural events.

Altieri's preoccupation with Antin's talks--as opposed to his texts--no doubt
receives its justification from Antin himself, who, as we recall, is not happy with the
written scores. Altieri's focus contradicts Sayre's thesis that Antin is equally concerned
with speech and writing. Altieri makes a great deal of Antin's understanding of tuning as
"negotiation" between speaker and audience. As the one who talks, Antin adjusts his talks
to the contingencies of the audiences he talks to--not with. This is different from the
author who writes to--not with--his audience, but the difference is not fundamental,
for it is impossible to write, revise and alter without some sense of an audience. For
Antin, the actual presence of the audience justifies direct negotiation over the writer's
indirect negotiation with the audiences. When Antin transcribes his talks, he imagines
himself as still a talker, for by excising punctuation, justified margins, and
grammatical conventions from his texts he transcribes in memory of the audiences to
which he has spoken. This nullifies his own assertion--quoted by Perloff in The Poetics
of Indeterminacy--that talking and writing are two different presences to which he is
utterly faithful; neither talking nor writing is more important than the other.27

Antin's hierarchizing of speech and writing is replicated in his relationship to his
audience. Though there may be negotiations, tunings, Antin does all the talking. This is not a dialogue. Moreover, Antin never asks the audience what they would like him to talk about. He repeats the "problem of posture" he places at the feet of the neoromantics. When Altieri makes the parenthetical remark that "Friends are to Antin what emotional states are to traditional lyric poets," does he imagine that this is to Antin's credit? As Altieri's remark suggests, lyricism depends on analogy, specifically, metaphor: between emotional states and "objective correlative" or between friends and "ideas." In either case, the vehicle and tenor the lyrical poet uses are less important than the effect of the vehicle-tenor relationship, what Sayre calls the new epiphany.

Now if the dream of lyricism is the dream of sincerity, it is clear that Antin does not share this dream if by sincerity one means the externalization of some interior state. Since he is not relying on his "emotional states," it is not a question of his own honesty. Altieri contrasts Antin's unselfconsciousness with neoromantic self-consciousness, suggesting that "Even the dream of honesty may well be largely a fantasy, justifying obsession with oneself in the quest for endless self-correction." But without saying so, Altieri has, by sleight of hand, changed the grounds of the debate. Is it justifiable to use "neoromantic" and "lyrical" interchangeably as he does? I have my doubts. All lyrical poets may be neoromantics, but not all neoromantic poets are lyrical poets. The confusion results from Altieri's defining Romanticism by one of its characteristics: lyricism. But even if I concede the equivalence of Romanticism with lyricism (for Altieri may mean that the neoromantics--not him--narrow Romanticism to lyricism), I cannot accept what is clearly Altieri's conflation of lyricism with one of its sub-genres: confessionalism. Again: all confessional poetry may be lyrical but not all lyrical poetry is confessional. Yet it is confessional poetry that is being talked about in the second half of Altieri's statement: "justifying obsession with oneself in the quest for endless self-correction." But the "dream of honesty" applies--if it applies--to lyrical poetry in general. Antin may be a lyrical poet without being a confessional poet. He dreams the
dream of honesty, but it is not the dream of tuning an emotional state to the frequency of an objective state. It is the dream of what Sayre calls a new epiphany, one that results from tuning objective states to one another.

Altieri wants to make the difference between Antin and his neoromantic contemporaries turn on the difference between honesty and explicitness. Thus he argues that Antin's sense of his "I" is entirely non-theatrical because it depends on negotiations with an audience. Thus Antin can wear

the will lightly, constantly testing [his] procedure by the sense of fluidity with the self and the audience which that allows. And this permits Antin the dream of total explicitness that I obviously find a crucial break from contemporary lyricism. Methodologically there need by no reserve because there are no constraints requiring him to produce an artifact that could stand on the other side of the plane, independent of the speech situation, and no need to abstract the self into some imaginary impersonal or transpersonal entity.32

The "dream of total explicitness" does not break from contemporary lyricism because it remains a dream. Thus Antin's method does require a reserve due to constraints. He tapes his talks to transcribe them for textual situations that are "independent of the speech situation." The constraints Antin submits to are his temporality, his historicity, etc.

Altieri is correct that these constraints are not necessary; Antin doesn't have to transcribe his talks. That he does while denigrating writing indicates his ambivalence, his understanding that he does what he does not like. And does so for the dream of literary immortality, financial reasons, etc.

In truth, I am not saying anything that Altieri does not say. When Altieri uses the subjunctive construction "need be," he refers to either what Antin does not do or to what he can only dream of not doing. If I grant that Altieri refers to a desire rather than an achievement, then how do I read his remark that he finds the dream a "crucial break from contemporary lyricism"? We have just read that the dream of honesty may be
largely a fantasy. Hence the difference between explicitness and honesty: the former is a dream, the latter mostly fantasy.

Is there a difference between the "dream of total explicitness" and the "dream of honesty" that "may be largely a fantasy?" The first phrase implies that Antin is only partially explicit; the second that neoromantic honesty is a partial reality. If I transpose the terms, it could be said that Antin's honesty is partial, that neoromantic explicitness is partial. Even if one reads this as a distortion of what Altieri means, a more important problem remains. How could a reader or listener measure either honesty or explicitness? Altieri knows that there's no way for readers to measure honesty, so its usefulness for readers of neoromantic poetry is questionable at best. But he valorizes explicitness by assigning it the more noble term "dream" when in fact it too is a fantasy and for the same reason. Not only aren't Altieri's distinctions between Antin and his neoromantic peers grounded in any actual achievements, but they also aren't grounded in any fundamental differences between what they each dream of achieving.

Before I examine some of Antin's talk poems I want to briefly establish the poetic--or anti-poetics--underlining his work. I have examined three David Antin's thus far: Perloff's, Sayre's and Altieri's. Before I turn to my Antin it seems appropriate to consider David Antins, even if the Antin below is already over a decade old. I also hope to show that despite the length of time between the first interview and the publication of Tuning, all of Antin's work can be tied together by related concerns.

Contrary to Altieri's claims, Antin's attitude toward his audience, however open, still retains a trace of the traditional insularity associated with the artist and his patrons. Altieri makes much of Antin's responsiveness to his audiences. Yet one might wonder why Antin has yet to include contributions from his audience in his transcribed talks. Here is an excerpt from an interview with Antin that Barry Alpert did for Vert:

BA: Could the question and answer period after one of your pieces be as much a
poem as the piece itself? The difficulty is with picking up the voices in the audience. Is that correct?

DA: That's one of the difficulties, but not the most important. I record the questions and answers some of the time and I've transcribed a few of these sessions. Like the one that came up after the Cooper Union talk. And it didn't seem interesting. Now I know that's a critical word that needs explaining. For example, I spoke here in Indiana and the question and answer period was very interesting. Whether the shape of it was interesting over the long run, whether it needed any further...

BA: Shaping?

DA: No. Life. Whether it needed or was worth transcribing is really what I mean. I don't know whether it would be useful for anybody besides those people who were in it to have heard this thing. I'm not sure. You see I have this uncertain and emergent sense of what I regard as a poem. And there is something in the form of the question and the answer that's so clear-cut in its demands, more clear-cut even than a conversation. And while I could imagine a conversation--some conversations--of being capable of moving into poems... I tend to think of a poem as having a certain... freedom... to move out into invention and discovery... and in some situations, the claims of the people you're addressing, talking toward, may begin to exert too much of a pull, violating the claims of the matter that you're moving toward.33

I don't want to diminish the sense of struggle evident in these words. Antin is clearly torn between the demands of his sense of self and the demands of what he wants to achieve in poetry, an achievement that would diminish that self to the point where he might indeed be simply a person speaking to other persons. Nonetheless I draw attention to Antin's retreat from the brink. Having broached the issue of audience participation in the poetic process, Antin at first wants to make it a matter of "interest" but quickly
concedes the unsatisfactory ambiguity of the term. The explanation of what he means by "interest" never arrives—directly. But indirectly, by a process of association and analogy, "interesting" gets associated with "useful," "freedom," "invention," and "discovery." These qualities also belong to the repertoire of the traditional poet.

According to Antin, these poetic qualities are generally absent from "conversations," dialogues between artists and audiences. The interview during which Antin makes these comments was conducted in 1973 and published in 1975, a year before the publication of Talking at the Boundaries and nine years before the publication of Tuning. I want to claim right now that Antin's ambivalence toward his work and his audience remained unchanged between 1973 and 1984.

Thus, despite the comments of William V. Spanos, for one, Antin's aesthetic is not anti-poetic but anti-literary, with a specific sense of the literary as elucidated in Antin's essay "Modernism and Postmodernism: Approaching The Present in American Poetry." As Altieri points out, Antin is interested in the materials or poetry; that is his heritage from the modernists. And when Antin himself argues for a poetry that would claim "all of talking, not just special kinds of talking," it would be difficult to deny or dismiss the liberating gesture. But inasmuch as Antin's idealization of the speech process takes place within the constraints of academic spaces, the postmodernism of this liberation begins to look like that other postmodernism--cultural postmodernism, a pejorative term for kitsch: cultural gentrification. Just as it is "in" to return to the authentic cultural sites of the urban jungle for ethnic cuisine, world music and intifada scarves, so it is "In" to apotheosize ordinary speech into a product palatable to the avant-garde audiences eager not to be left behind. I don't ascribe these attitudes to Antin in general, only when he pretends to be doing more than he really is doing. But I do mean these criticisms for his critical champions eager to prove how interested they are in persons simply speaking to other persons. It may well be that the current and increasing reaction against neoromanticism and experimentalism is part and parcel of the
Bloom/Bennett/Hirsch phenomenon: the barbarians are (again) at the gates.

\* \* \*

Toward the end of the first talk poem in *Talking at the Boundaries*, "what am i doing here," Antin, who throughout this piece has been attempting to say how "all talking is poetry and that not all poetry is talking," by which he means there can be a "poetry of the cry," says that "poetry is uninterruptable discourse."\(^{36}\) Since "all talking is poetry," talking too is uninterruptable discourse. But in what possible sense are poetry and talking uninterruptable? Antin goes on to say that he can imagine a poetry that would be "a form of dialogue": what one says could be interrupted by another who wants to say something, something "that we have/shut you out from so long."\(^{37}\)

Consider the question of interruptability. From either an author's or a reader's perspective, written poetry is always interruptable. Few poems are composed without interruptions from external sources (Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" is one of the more famous examples). And a reader is always subject to interruptions while reading poems. The possibility of interruption is present at some level for all forms of writing, speaking, reading and listening. Of course, what Antin may mean is that interruptions are rarely incorporated into the composition process (though Joyce is said to have done just that while writing *Ulysses*). One expects then to witness a new poetry, one that incorporates some of the comments, laughter, guffaws, hisses and questions of the audience. But Antin opens the possibility of being interrupted by his listeners three lines from the end of "what am i doing here": what follows is a blank page.

Antin, the purveyor of talk poems, recorder and transcriber of his own work, is certainly in the position to encourage and incorporate audience participation. He does not do so. Is it enough for Antin to have simply raised the question? Only if he were the first, and he was not. Is it because talking and poetry can only dream of escaping their origins that, on Antin's view, are linked to fascism?\(^{38}\) Despite the overture to a radical democratism at the end of this talk, Antin knows that not everything everyone says would
be printed by any publisher, much less New Directions: talking and poetry also have their "council of elders."³⁹

At the beginning of this talk Antin says that poetry is art added to talking, but it is only because Antin is so skilled at a particular kind of talking that he enjoys his current critical acclaim.⁴⁰ Moreover, despite his suggestions of a complicity between the sciences and fascism, Antin's own talk draws on a number of disciplines, including physics. Perhaps this is why his talk concludes with the acknowledgement of his own complicity with fascist discourse, which is why he can only dream of a democratic interruptable discourse. But, of course, Antin's use of terms like fascism and totalitarianism is facile; it vulgarizes the relationship between author/speaker and reader/listener, even when the latter never interrupts or is prevented from interrupting. Antin himself glimpses this other common use of talking when he says that "there is a kind / of talking that is responsory directly responsory."⁴¹ One responds after one has heard what another has to say. It is a matter of ethics.

Without question Antin's talk pieces represent a novel and compelling movement in contemporary American poetry. But as concerns the question of openness and closure, Antin's work evades constraints no less and no more successfully than other neoromantic or experimental poetry. For example, this piece begins and ends with a discussion of the differences between talking and poetry; closure here takes the form of a thematic frame. In the beginning of the piece, the discussion takes the form of a distinction between "telling" and "writing" (or, as Antin calls both, "mything") while at the ending the discussion takes the form of a distinction between "interruptable" and "uninterruptable" discourse. Furthermore, the structure of the talk poem is generated by a dialectic of hypotheses and examples that orbit the common center of what Antin is doing there (talking or poetry). Despite the assertions Antin resorts to, this talk does not provide definite answers: the examples only support the hypotheses. But, in turning toward his audience, listeners and readers, with a rhetorical invitation to speak near the conclusion
of the talk poem, Antin repeats a strategy characteristic of poems as diverse as Baudelaire's "To the Reader" and Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey."

Closure is also effected throughout the talk. For all its sweeping speculative power, "what am I doing here" never strays far from its central motif: motion, movement and inertia. And each time this motif gets played out in one of its variations, the talk itself acquires another arc; it spirals toward profundity and sublimity (Sayre's new epiphany). And here, as elsewhere, what brings the interita of this spiraling to a stop is not an interrupting force from without but Antin himself--just at the moment he invites audience participation.

* * *

In the title poem of this collection Antin says that his work is no longer confined to the fields of either "a poet / a linguist / an art critic . . . a poem a criticism an investigation but somehow lying / between them or on their borders." If, as Harold Bloom has said, every poem is implicitly a criticism of a precursor poem, then insofar as these talks, thematically and formally, function as critiques of normative poetry, these talks are poems that have extended the limits of what it means to be a poem. These talks often reflect upon their own ontological and epistemological status; they function as prose critiques as they parody and polemicize: precisely the characteristics Perloff identifies with postmodernist art in general. What is innovative about these talks is that their titles often become the explicit subject-matter under discussion.

Nevertheless, I think Antin makes too much of the title's genesis, especially when he opposes that process to how the titles of normal poems get thought up. The distinctions between the two processes become analogous to the ways talks and poems are made: "as a poet I / was getting extremely tired of what I considered an unnatural / language act going into a closet so to speak sitting in / front of a typewriter because anything is possible in a closet / in front of a typewriter and nothing is necessary." If necessity is another name for closure, then it is only in a closet that one might circumvent the
metaphysics of the necessary. Antin says this but does not see it, a classic example of de Man's *Blindness and Insight* (1971). For Antin, possibility--freedom--is unnatural; he is correct. Only metaphysics can define the natural. The unnatural breeds openness, discovery, invention. I deliberately employ the words that Antin used less than five years prior to the publication of *Talking to the Boundaries* to explain why he didn't incorporate public responses into his talks. Then, it was in the name of freedom, invention and discovery. Antin has apparently submitted to the necessity of keeping the audience "shut out" even if its presence "influences" the talks in which it does not partake: "I was seeking an occasion for the / kind of talking I wanted to do." I grant Antin the different effects, difficulties and rewards of composition in the presence of an audience. So what? Talking on the telephone, writing letters, blind dating, and walking to a park are as natural as conversing at the dinner table. And if by natural Antin only means normal--that is, conventional, quotidian--then how can anyone call standing up in an auditorium, turning on a tape recorder, and rambling on for thirty minutes or so on apparently bizarre non sequiturs natural? On this basis, the necroromantic poetry Antin attacks is natural. If only metaphysics can define the natural, the question here is the source of Antin's investment in the natural.

In "what am I doing here," Antin concludes the "candy" anecdote with these statements: "I contemplate the scene / the *debacle* which I didn't / invent I hate inventing and I hate imagination / this story was / told me yesterday I assure you." The sincerity of plainspeak: such is one source of Antin's investment in the natural, in talks that are not "poetry" although he has already told us "all talking is poetry." Antin argues--but no, argument is artifice. Antin speaks against invention and imagination because these give rise to the accumulation of a knowledge that dominates the world whose existence it threatens. He does so in a wonderfully inventive mode. He does so in the form of the têtê-à-têtê, assuring his audience of his sincerity. If he is lying, inventing, imagining things, his listeners can read it in his eyes, his gestures, hear it in the timbre of his
voice. But there's a problem. Later, while discussing his long-lost friend's psychological problems, Antin admits that he's forgetful; he can't recall if he or his friend drove Antin's car into town. Since Antin has told his audience that he can't recall who was driving, and since they may be able to tell by his posture, gestures, eye contact, or whatever that he's telling the truth or lying. I mean, that's the point of the tete-a-tete: we can tell if he's telling the truth or lying, right? So it's not a question of his sincerity for us. But what if he's forgetful? Gotten details mixed up? Getting a story's details mixed up and intentionally lying—can the listeners make distinctions here? Isn't the result the same regardless? If details have been forgotten or mixed up, then, in spite of his professed hatred of invention and imagination, Antin has in fact invented and imagined.

The prohibition against invention and imagination runs throughout Antin's work. As talk poems like "gambling," "currency" and "real estate," all from Tuning, indicate, invention and imagination always presuppose a hierarchy between any two negotiators: speaker and listener, winner and loser, seller and buyer, dollar and yen. Since there is no escape from the market (for it is something in the market that is being negotiated), tuning, the process of coming as close as possible to understanding the other, is the best and, for Antin, most ethical form of interacting with other people. This is why the test of sincerity is so important to Antin's project. But again: How can the listener know whether some details have been forgotten or intentionally suppressed? And what about me, only a reader of Antin's work? I can't see his face or gestures, yet when he transcribes from the tape the phrase "I assure you," why should I be assured by these words alone? If Antin responds that my skepticism is a consequence of the alienating effects of concerning myself with written texts, then I respond: why publish your talks? If sincerity and naturalness depend on the tete-a-tete, then why this potentially insincere and unnatural act of publication? Why submit to this non-necessity?

Antin vacillates between bad faith and, I suppose, good faith. A great deal of the bad
faith is evident when he talks against his own expressed desires, when he says more than he knows, when he believes he's doing more than he really is doing. At one point in this talk he assumes that "because this talk was sponsored by a library an art / department and an English department were on a boundary or at the intersection of three boundaries so there is no opportunity for shop talk." Both before--as talk--and after--as book--there is indeed shop talk, perhaps not the shop talk only of libraries, only of art departments, or only of English departments, but the Shop Talk common to all three: the nature and theory of art and communication and their propagation. No doubt Antin wishes for, or imagines there is, an intellectual community outside the academy (for Antin, shop talk = academic jargon). But today, fortunately or unfortunately, those intellectual communities beyond the university are founded and/or populated by those trained in the university and its cognates (learning centers, writing resources, retreat locales, etc.) On the other hand, Antin does, at other times, recognize the limitations of this project and contrasts these with the pretentious certainties that the book tends to evoke:

one of the reasons i'm talking rather than reading / is that i don't want to carry any more weight than talk that is / this is as true or as important as it is and as it sounds and / its no truer and its not any heavier if i put it in paragraphs it wouldn't become truer or more important it would look truer / and its not a lie what i'm saying i assure you to the extent / that i can assure you i'm not lying but the extent of my / assurance is not that its going to be true because whether / what im saying is true or not depends on whether im right and i / have no assurance of that

This respect for what remains outside one's sphere of understanding and knowledge also, and especially, applies to people. One of the most fascinating stories here revolves around the eccentricities of Antin's aunt and her refusals to move or do anything. Antin carefully interweaves his narrative of her idiosyncrasies with a discussion of the
philosophical problems of translation. He correctly notes that the fundamental function and problem of translators is translating what is meaningless to others into what is meaningful to them. This means that which is beyond metaphysics must be reeled in, captured in the orbit of understanding. Antin's aunt, who does nothing, who does not work, has already refused metaphysics: she is neither ill nor well, sane or insane--she is "simply" undecideable. But Antin, who is "translating again . . . telling what [he] think[s] she's saying," is doing the work of metaphysics. The original translator, he is turning her existence into life, her refusals into narrative. And yet, just as Antin is about to deliver the final hermeneutic coup, tell us what all this really "means," he backs away. He honors her difference; "I think its important for you not / to understand my aunt."50

To talk at the boundaries: this "at" means both directed toward and located there. Antin talks toward the place he is not quite at: the English Department, the art department, the library. But because this talk still talks the talk common to the tri-institute area, it remains bounded by their borders. Moreover, most of this talk remains bounded by the borders of the English department: there's shop talk and then there's shop talk. Closure is effected on several fronts. Thematically, closure is effected from start to finish since the motif of translation and understanding dominates the talk. And yet, despite its thesis, this talk remains "creative" rather than "scholarly" since none of the hypotheses or references are subject to evaluation and authorization by readers or listeners. Perhaps this too only underlines the importance of the ethos of sincerity. And because this talk does not circle back to its beginnings, because it is a series of ever-differing variations on a theme, there would be no way for a listener to know when Antin was "finished." "Talking at the Boundaries" remains open at its own border.

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"is this the right place" would seem to promise a certain openness from the outset, a
sense that this talk could go on and on indefinitely, without closure. The implicit theme Antin spins his spiral of variations on is the illusion of final preparation, the belief that one can in fact become finally prepared for anything. As usual, the title and thesis are generated during Antin's trip to the location of the talk. "is this the right place" is predicated on the sensation that arises when one realizes that psychological distance plays a greater role in our sense of travel time than geographical distance. Not only do familiar places feel "closer" to us than unfamiliar ones, but unfamiliar places often leave us with the sensation that we never arrive there, that we are always about to get there. Armed with this common and profound insight, Antin deploys driving as a metaphor for preparation, the way one supposedly arrives at some destination in one's life:

people who come to colleges are there with expectations / some kind of expectations there's a transient quality to a / college you're there in some preparational state and its not / entirely clear what teaching in a college is either as far as im/concerned its neither clear what teaching in a college is nor / is it clear what learning in a college is or attending a college is."

A few lines down Antin confesses that he's "always had this fear that experience prepares you for what will / never happen again."51 This leads into a discussion of how we tend to consider some events as "experiences" and other events as non-experiences, the former justified by what moral we can extract from them. This practice is finally delusory, though not always tragic;

and your definition of the real has a lot to do with your / notion of what an experience should be because your definition / of the real is more like a hope about things that should prove to be / real the real is like a construction something that you / build piece by piece and then it falls on you or you / move into it and then you're sorry or you're delighted52

I read Antin here as discussing our desire for closure, for a house of reality built up out
of our preconceptions and anticipations. But the house is never completed; it remains open to sun and rain, friend and foe. For hope is what keeps open a future we can only imagine as having never arrived:

and I realized he had prepared his life he had a / terrifically prepared life and he was waiting for it to begin / and I kept feeling it would be interesting for him to have asked / if it was the right place for it to begin because he was aware / that the place he was in was not the place where it was beginning / and he was waiting for something to happen

Given our seemingly contradictory desires for closure and openness, for security and adventure, little wonder we often confound our own attempts to get a grip on our lives. Is it our sense of what we assume to be an irreducible division between life and death that leads us to forestall our acceptance of closure, of limits, that this life is our only life? "no matter where you are it / isn't the right place because its not the right time the whole / feeling is you're getting ready for something you're always / getting ready."53

At stake here is the notion of a present that we can finally arrive at even as our own desires look beyond that place we never reach anyway. In Tuning Antin explores this notion in a piece appropriately entitled "how long is the present." Antin tells us that "in looking at my own book and feeling / that as I look I lose my sense of the present my sense / of the present disintegrates for me as I read."54 Unlike talking, which gives one the illusion of a voice present to itself in all its immediacy, reading defers meaning and understanding: so goes the Derridean account of this phenomenon. To ask "how long is the present" is to have already idealized temporality as an instant that is quantifiable even as the notion of quantification destroys the basis on which an instant might exist.

Reading destroys the illusion of a present or instant under the force of temporality: "I don't have / a sense of the present when I look at my book and have to / read it."55 Even the idea of the present as a purely phenomenological construct is not invulnerable to the
pressures of temporality:

I was holding / campari and soda in my hand and feeling the / moisture on the
glass and the slight coolness from the / ice and I said is this the present it was
very / unconvincing it wasn't there wasn't enough pressure / in it too many
things pressed upon it and into it there / were too many comings and goings of
things into it.56

Back to "is this the right place." It is not long before Antin confesses that he too was
caught up in the dream of some about-to-be before he realized that life was precisely the
state of being caught up in the flux of the about-to-be:

I had been doing certain kinds of photographing / say and making certain kinds of
soundtracks and doing some / kinds of performances which I had thought would
be getting me ready to do something else and they didn't get me ready / and then
I was doing researching and it turned out that the researching itself was
something I had been studying things / and the studying was itself something for
no reason / the studying itself was interesting57

This is the familiar postmodernist edict of process, and as I argued at the outset of this
essay, both Wordsworthian and Whitmanesque processes link up in the Olsonian concept
of open form and the valorization of the objects at hand. For Antin, it is the inability to
take seriously process, openness and the thing at hand that marks the proponents of
preparation: "and this inability to take seriously this strange / sense that you can't take
seriously anything that is at hand is one / of the great weaknesses of the theory of
preparation."58 But Antin himself falls prey to the theory of preparation when he
essentializes the concept and links it to print, texts, books:

Writing is a form of fossilized talking . . . a frozen food / container called a book
but on the other hand if you don't know how to handle that frozen food container
that icy block will never / turn back into talking and if it will never turn back
into talking / it will never be any use to you again59
One is almost shocked by this regression to a "pre"-deconstruction view of the relationship between talking and writing by a man who, make no mistake, is well-read.

Antin ends this talk with a discussion of the link between preparation, pornography and representation, a thesis which has generated controversy in feminist film theory and other places. Preparation as product gets linked to pornography for the same reason representation does: all three tend to invoke essentialism. Thus Antin is led to the uneasy but logical conclusion that "maybe it is that the characteristic of an / artist is the gift of being ready to do something for which you're not / prepared," Antin’s way of trying to protect the artist from the charge of pornographer (because he represents, because he prepares). But if there is no possibility of being finally prepared, and thus no final representation, pornography is that which one may attempt to produce but never succeed in producing. Pornography would then be a moral category that no human act could ever fill. Thus when Antin writes that

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there's no place at which i can end / it without producing a kind of profoundly
pornographic poetic effect which i assure you i can do i could produce a vast
symphonic conclusion and you might walk out feeling benefitted / but i won't do
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he does what he has just said he wouldn't do. The anti-climax is one of the oldest poetic devices of closure. I have only read this line--not heard Antin speak it--but I cannot believe it did not have the same dramatic effect on its listeners. A series of conditionals followed by a negative declaration: how could this not be as dramatic as the falling of a curtain? Furthermore, the last two pages of this talk are symphonic in intensity because Antin brings together a number of concepts like representation, pornography, and preparation heretofore discussed separately. Closure is achieved not only formally but also thematically. Irony surfaces in the form of an antithetical relationship between saying ("but i wont do it") and doing (Antin in fact does end the piece dramatically).

- This difference between saying and doing is roughly analogous to the dilemma
(etymologically, "two propositions or assumptions") of those who prepare for something to begin without realizing that that something began with preparation.

* * *

"the sociology of art" opens with a recitation of ideas and subjects covered in other talks in this collection. This talk opens itself up to other talks; this Intertextuality plays back and forth, formally opening up the question of the relationships between the talks. Thematically, dialogue is established between this talk and others in terms of the opposition of the so-called temporal arts to the spatial ones. Formally, the intertextual openness of the talk paves the way for the thematic closure of the speech / writing debate, closed because it is bounded on all sides by the concepts of space and time. In short, Antin resurrects the either/or model of logic criticized by Jacques Derrida in his deconstruction of essentialist themes in Husserl, Heidegger and Hegel.

Antin spends much of the first twenty pages of "the sociology of art" relating drawing, writing and spatiality to inflexibility while remembering, speaking and temporality are related to flexibility. If it is true that "a 'story' is never present all at once" because "its / beginning and end cant be surveyed at the same time," the same thing could be said for all representations, including maps and drawings. The "isolated and bounded context of a drawing or map" is an illusion propagated by the idealization of closure. One can always see a different form or arrangement of any particular thing or things within, say, a map or drawing. These art forms are as indefinite, open and fluid as storytelling, talking or remembering.

Antin relates an anecdote about an anecdote he told his wife. He asks her some time after to recall specified details from the anecdote. Not surprisingly, her accuracy degenerates with the passing of time. Eventually she begins to create, invent and imagine details that were never present in the original anecdote. The flexibility of recall is meant to stand as an example of what the frozen sterility of writings, maps and drawing can never hope to emulate. What Antin forgets is that there are lots of maps and
drawings of the same thing, lots of writings about the same thing; they change each time they are drawn or written. Moreover, maps, drawing and writings can be read by different people, in different circumstances, etc. Remembering and drawing are two modes of the same phenomenon--perception--and both are unstable, fluid and partial. There is no way to posit one as prior to the other on any basis--certainly not a temporal/spatial one--except by invoking some metaphysical "ground."

Antin goes on to argue that writing is "an attempt to overcome the deficiencies of / the human."63 Well, yes and no. Writing attempts to overcome the "deficiencies of / the human" in the sense that it extends the concept of the human. Which is to say: writing criticizes the "naturalistic" concept of the human as that which ends at its outer skin. But assume the human is only this "normal" idea. Do not speaking and remembering attempt to overcome the limitations of this human? If to be human is to be always dying, then forgetting and letting go is human while recalling and holding on are attempts to compensate for that dying. All forms of human communication implicitly affirm historicity by their efforts to transcend it in some form. Nor can Antin work up a credible distinction between what he calls textual "erasure" and oral "obliteration," textual "length" and oral "energy":

it is this 'constructed' literal form which requires the mechanical operations of erasure and excision the only way you can / get rid of an object is to destroy it but an oral poem has no / such problem if you take a wrong turn make a false start / you cant 'erase' it but you can recover and you can obliterate it from memory64

First, who is this "you" that can so easily obliterate a wrong turn or false start? The listener? The speaker? Who has the power to obliterate his memory by willpower alone (chemicals might do the job)? As Antin's exemplary stories have already shown, no one can control what he remembers or forgets. Second, what is the epistemological difference between what one no longer sees (erasure) and what one no longer hears
Antin can't be drawing on the intelligible-sensible distinction because both seeing and hearing are physical activities. Three, if the mind in the presence of a written text deceives "itself into forget-ting that it has constructed this 'space' and the 'form' that / is an imaginary configuration within it," then why shouldn't we suspect the mind of having also created the idea of time and the modalities that are figured within it? Is time the compensatory concept of a memory painfully aware of its limitations? Does it matter that "the principle of economy of form in an oral work is measured out in / energy not in length" when the concepts of energy and length, like space and time, belong to the classical mechanics of a Newtonian world that is always invoked at the moment when the limits of knowledge threaten to silence one? Bound to talk, David Antin is still negotiating his poetry toward an opening that cannot be named in advance of its sighting. In his voice one occasionally hears the timbres of neoromanticism and experimentalism singing from the banks.
NOTES

1 I don't consider these two movements the only ones that continue to open up the possibilities of poetry today: a cursory review of journals like Exquisite Corpse, Howling Dog, and River Styx would dispel the illusion if I had it. But I concentrate on them due to their academic currency and because, from Olson to Antin, academics seem most concerned about "openings," perhaps due to the perception of the claustrophobic closures of academia. Finally I exclude what Altieri calls neoromantic poetry, and include language writing, because I believe the aesthetic distance between neoromanticism and its forebears is not as great as those between language writing and its forebears.

2 In an ideal atemporal world I would append to this essay as its last word a chapter on the poetry of Frank O'Hara. What is radical about O'Hara is not his technique in particular—in some way Kenneth Koch, among others, is more stylistically interesting. And as for his apparent "themes," well, he and Koch are neck and neck on that point. What is radical about O'Hara is his humor and careless sense of play. Yes, careless. I'd argue that this carelessness—insparable from his play and humor but not reducible to them—permeates every level of O'Hara's poetry: composition, publishing, revisions, etc. And it is this combination of careless humor, careless play, that sets him apart from almost all the language writers and neoromantics. I don't know of any specific contemporary poets that have taken up the difficult legacy he bequeathed to poetry, and I know of no criticism that has seen the radical implications of his careless play and careless humor.


5 Perloff 318.

6 Perloff 319.

7 Perloff 320.

8 Perloff 329-30.

9 Altieri 13.

10 Sayre 433-35.

11 Sayre 447.

12 Sayre 435.

13 Sayre 441.
19 Altieri’s opening sentence is instructive as concerns the thesis he elaborates throughout his essay: "Ten years ago I thought I would never again use the term 'Postmodern' so vague and important had the concept become." For Altieri it is vague because it refuses reduction to a coherent table of contents and procedures and it is impotent because it resurrects a Romantic tradition thoroughly if ambivalently critiqued by modernist tenets. As I argued in the first chapter, postmodernism defines itself by not being itself: it is neither Perloff’s “parody” only nor Lyotard’s paralogy only. It encompasses neoromanticism and experimentation. Altieri is correct that Antin satisfies the different demands of both movement; nonetheless he sees Antin as more experimentalist than neoromantic; I see Antin as more neoromantic than experimentalist.

20 Altieri 11.

21 See footnote 35.

22 Altieri 11-12.

23 Altieri 11.

24 Altieri 12.

25 Altieri 12.

26 Altieri, footnote 5, 12.

27 Perloff

28 Altieri 16.

29 Altieri 16.

30 For example, Altieri quotes Antin as claiming that he is interested in anyone’s experiences "in a kind of ordinary way without putting any special value on it." (21) And yet these experiences are given special value by Antin. They become valued as analogies to one another, examples or illustrations of themes Antin fleshes out in the course of his talks. In Antin’s talks the thesis—sometimes stated, sometime not—serves as the tenor; the various anecdotes, the experiences of his friends, function as the vehicles. This is why the emotional states of lyric poets are analogous to Antin’s friends and their experiences. And just as the lyric poet often recollects an emotional state he no
longer feels, so Antin's use of his friends depend on their absence: "As he thinks of people, he begins to comprehend their lives and his own in ways that he might not were he actually talking to them. (21) Like writing, talking depends on a certain absence.

31 Altieri 19.

32 Altieri 21.


35 David Antin, "A Correspondence with the Editors, William V. Spanos and Robert Kroetsch," Boundary 2, Spring 1975, 624. In his essay, "Some Questions about Modernism," published a year earlier (Occident, 8, Spring 1974), Antin attacks Eliot's modernism as mere trivia talk. He writes of The Four Quartets: "If Eliot had numbered all the variations, instead of numbering only larger sections, the poem might have looked a little less self-important and the essentially lightweight playfulness of the poetry might have been evident, and we might have avoided all the grave debates about what Eliot meant in the poem, and we could have dispensed with the Casebook on the Four Quartets, because it would have appeared quite clearly that the poem had no ideas at all but merely played with different kinds of talk." (10) Playing with talk is here opposed to taking it seriously as Antin's first collection of talk poems, published two years after this essay appeared, makes clear. Three pages after this attack Antin elevates Stein to the solitary rank of The Only American Modernist because she was the one writer, in Antin's estimation, who actually did what she claimed: explicitly reworked the materials of language. Antin's dismissal of the other modernists is justified, he claims, because of the disjunction between what they claimed (a concern with reworking language) and what they did (collage, parataxis, etc., says Antin, leave intact the materials of language, thus sidestepping the issue).

36 David Antin, Talking at the Boundaries (New York: New Directions, 1976) 23. hereafter abbreviated as TB.

37 TB 24.

38 TB 22-23. Antin correctly cites the development of the sacred complex of language and scientific inquiry and compares it to the development of the secular imperative set of gestures and procedures associated with poetry. This is why representational poetry comes under attack from Antin; like scientific language, it pretends to convey a reality prior to language and observation. Antin shares this distrust of representation, and for the same reason, with the language poets.

39 This is what Antin calls the priesthood of the sciences, that body of assumptions and beliefs Thomas Kuhn dubbed "paradigm" in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970) 10-11.

40 TB 3.
41 TB 23.

42 TB 55.

65 TB 190.

66 TB 191.
CHAPTER SIX

I close this essay with a brief overview of some of the poetics of that other experimental pole of contemporary American poetry: language writing. I begin with an examination of the various poetics as stated by several of the practitioners, two self-critiques by two language writers, and then conclude with a glance at some of the critical and creative work of Barrett Watten. The thesis of this chapter is again the extent to which language writing opens up and closes off the possibilities of poetry. Inasmuch as the language writers arose as a self-consciously leftist (mostly Marxist) and anti-neoromantic response to what they perceived as a dominant political and aesthetic mainstream in postmodernist culture, the central question I will be asking is this: to what extent do the language writers' poetics open onto larger cultural issues and how is this opening oriented in regard to a sense of audience?

There is no better place to start than the book that first exposed language writing to a broad poetry audience: The L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E Book. The hyphenation of language is itself a salvo: it draws attention to each letter as sufficiently motivated and motivating. Bruce Andrews' and Charles Bernstein's introduction, "Repossessing The Word," drives home the point:

It is our sense that the project of poetry does not involve turning language into a commodity for consumption; instead, it involves repossessing the sign through close attention to, and active participation in, its production.

What is striking about this assertion is the way the language of political economy and the language of semiotics merge here into a repudiation of two of the presumptions of traditional reader-response theory: that the reader's response to a text is (1) different from and (2) subordinate to its production. Andrews and Bernstein collapse both differences. I shall later discuss the "liberating" effects of this strategy.

Clark Coolidge is one of the senior language writers. His sense of the compositional process is deceptively straightforward:
The poet Philip Whalen, when he teaches, says the first thing is to write down the words on the paper. Now that sounds dumb, but it's a great secret because you start the transformation process from outside to inside to back outside, something you can see. You can't carry it around in your head forever.4

As in the poetic of David Antin, the emphasis here is on the dialogue as dialectic. For Coolidge, the dialogue occurs between the paper (the outside) and the writer (the inside) whereas for Antin the dialogue occurs between the audience (his outside) and the talker (the inside). From the reader's point of view, Coolidge's treatment of the page is not fundamentally different than Antin's treatment of the audience: both reject the interiorization of composition and, instead, propose its externalization. Thus what Coolidge says below about process glosses Antin's comments on the same value:

If I don't get a certain kind of movement, a literal moving forward in time in my work, I don't feel like it's happening... I'm not one of those people who do a lot of revision. I might change a word or two, but that's about it... If something isn't working, I just throw it out and start over.5

For both Antin and Coolidge process supersedes product. For both, it's the going, not the getting there, that's important. Behind this value of process lies a precursor common to both: Charles Olson. For Coolidge, Antin and Olson, externalization happens when the poet projects his words: hence projective verse. As we saw with Olson, projecting has its ethical dimension: objectism. So too for Andrews, Bernstein, Coolidge and Antin: a participatory poetry. But these language writers and oral performers also share with Olson the empiricist bias of projection: what is externalized is subject to observation and evaluation. Not so with what remains interiorized. This is why the touchstone of sincerity remains indispensable only for the neoromantics. That the problem of sincerity is not resolved by externalization, and that it remains a problem for experimentalists, is indicated by the concern with "explicitness." As we shall see in Watten's work, "explicitness"--another term for externalization for the
experimentalists--is meant to circumvent the aesthetic implications of sincerity but, at the same time, resolve all the problems associated with it.

On the other hand, language writer Theodore Enslin appears to be much more the traditionalist:

But I have absolutely no sense of an audience. There is nothing when I'm writing save for the materials. I'm not writing for myself, exactly, but to solve a problem . . . If afterwards the problem is not imperfectly resolved and I want to keep the work, then I am very much concerned with audience.6

Enslin emphasizes his sense of the audience as non-participatory and belated. And Nathaniel Tarn, admired by Antin, sounds very much like the Antin we read in his 1973 interview with Barry Alpert. Tarn says that he has "always believed that poetry is an uninterrupted voice going on inside you . . ."7

Perhaps it is not surprising that Tarn raises some of the most important, if common, objections to the premises of language poetry. I believe Steve McCaffery's explicitly Marxist-structuralist critique, which I review below, is more searching and more damaging since McCaffery is more sympathetic to the movement--he too is a language poet--than Tarn. I quote Tarn judiciously so that we may feel the full force of his criticisms:

Now you may argue that, if reader-response (reception) is as important as it is to the Language poet, he/she is going to claim that exegesis is an individual matter which cannot be regimented. This is fine for the rare free spirit, usually another poet. But, where there is difficulty or obscurity, the average reader will be led back to the professor, and the academy will reclaim its rights. Once more they will tyrannize over us with their canons. And once more, books of poems will be commodities.8

The confusions here cannot be ignored. What reader-response theorist would recognize the claim that exegesis is "an individual matter" even if it "cannot be regimented?" And
as for the return to the "professor," there are appreciable differences between the writing and reading centers organized by language writers (as well as other writing groups not affiliated with the university) and those that go on in university classrooms. But if by "professor" Tarn means any professed expert, he would then seem to posit a poetry that really is or can be simply persons speaking to other persons. Finally, Tarn's use of the term "commodities" is really strange here. Commodities are objects purchased for consumption by automata (i.e. consumers). From the point of view of some language writers, the literary commodity is Barthes' readerly text. Books of language poems would become readerly only under the redundant readings that coalesce into a tradition. Tarn has inadvertently hit upon a central problem of the language movement, though it is not the problem he cites.

One of the tenets of language writers is "explicitness." Their critical publications are meant to illuminate their own works as well as those of their peers. They want to demystify the cult of hermeticism that attaches itself to poetry and could easily attach itself to their difficult works. But this understandable concern with "explanation" contradicts the other tenet of language writing: the production of meaning by the reader. Now, let me quickly add that these tenets are not always contradictory. What often gets explicated in their critical writings and forums is the how, or rather, hows, to read the poetry. This differs from the reader's production of what, that is, meaning. But this only raises more difficulties. Even if such a strategy were carried out consistently by the poet and the reader, the "success" of their relationship would depend upon their respecting the old form/content division which here takes the form of "structure" and "meaning." Furthermore, why should the reader accept the writer's explanation for the "form" of his poem if the reader can discover another one? But even if this reader agrees to accept the writer's explanation, it's not as if the reader is then "free" to produce his own meaning ("own" here refers to a complex of selves with all the historical, textual, cultural, etc. constraints). For the predetermination of form
determines the meaning(s) that can be produced. If Joyce could write *Finnegans Wake* without attaching a concordance of explanations, submitting to the uncertainty that the readers of that book might not ever be born, would it be unfair to locate the language writer's concern with explanation in a value other than demystification?

I am still reading Tarn:

one of the extraordinary things to me is his [Ron Stillman's] incredible illusion that he is founding a literary community. The idea is that they are taking the book of poems out of the 'commodity fetish' market, and that in some ways their poems are more widely available than the average poets'. Well, are they? It seems to me that the reception/consumer aspect there is narrower than ever. The fact that we are manufacturing more and more poets through the mechanisms of the MFA means that the incestuous family is a very large one, but it remains incestuous. They are right on that part. But are the Language poets any less incestuous? Are there *nonpoets* on the street who are spending their time reading Language poetry? I don't think so. You may say that there is nobody on the street reading Olson or Duncan, or anything at all, and to a certain extent that's true. But it seems to me that the funnel is narrowing more.9

Tarn presumes that the language poets formulated their strategies with the aim of widening the poetry-reading audience to include more and more *non-poets*. But this is a serious misreading of the language writers through the lens of neoromanticism. Everything the language writers have said explicitly recognizes that their audiences are largely composed of other writers and critics.10 Their programs are directed against the neoromantic mainstream of academic poetry, and as many of these writers are themselves academics, what we have here is essentially a family squabble. Tarn's concern with the lack of an audience of *non-poets* is founded on Wordsworth's, Antin's, etc.'s dream: persons speaking to persons. It is disingenuous to name MFA programs incestuous simply because they produce poets who read other poets and thus constitute a
large portion of the serious poetry audience. It may be that the proliferation of MFA programs and poets is instead the greatest flattery of poetry: they turn their audiences into artists like themselves. Their growth may be a revision of Wordsworth's dream: instead of persons simply speaking to one another we have--especially as concerns the collaborations of language writers--poets writing with one another.

Certainly language writing idealizes the possibility of circumventing expertise, a concept they associate with hegemony. Bob Perelman introduces his anthology of conversations and essays this way:

A community of writers was considering writing, an activity of equal interest to all. So no one was 'the expert.' The mode varies at time from formal essays to informal talks, but in all cases the talk was not for talk's sake, but for the sake of writing.\(^{11}\)

This is far from Antin—if not anti-Antin—but it isn't as anti-talk as Robert Gluck's commentary which undermines both Antin's studied seriousness and language writing's serious non-seriousness:

But when the avant-garde talks about itself, it becomes extremely professional. If the language that addresses experimental writing has any charm, it is often based on difficult syntax and terms that want to be technical, associated with science. Maybe this expertise validates play--makes it look like work and so appear accessible; and this may be just another separation into parts (in this case the analytical and spontaneous) that characterizes late capitalism.\(^{12}\)

Moreover, the division of labor between authorial dictation and reader reception is not entirely overcome even if the reader is given materials from which to produce meanings and play, for the fact remains that the materials are copyrighted by the author; in boss/worker terms this procedure is analogous to giving workers middle-management control over a workplace that remains the property of capitalists.

Language writer and critic Steve McCaffery treats the problem of the writer's labor
value in his essay "Diminished Reference and the Model Reader." McCaffery explains why this kind of writing demands a new kind of reading: "Conventional reading habits would demand a referential transit in the poem above to a point beyond the words themselves, thereby eluding the material pull inherent in the text." McCaffery assumes that referentiality is achieved at the total expense ("eluding the material pull") of the text. If this were true of conventional reading habits, no one would feel obliged to comment on the formal properties of the "material" text, even when such commentaries try to show how the text points "beyond the words themselves." The array of devices and strategies available to the tradition of prosody are not simply tools for evading textual materiality; rather, they are tools for constructing well-wrought urns whose aesthetic appeal is located within the artifacts and outside, not in referentiality but in signification. And even if the American neoromantic tradition has generally attempted to elide textual self-reflexivity, this achievement, when it occurs, is always partial. This reflexive property belongs to languages—not the author. Conventional readings always circulate among signifiers, signifieds and referents, for these elements are irreducible to one another.

Moreover, even if a text like "Codicil" activates the passive consuming reader, converting her into a producer of meaning, the question of the reader's motivation—why should she bother making her meaning out of someone else's work?—has only been sidestepped, not answered. McCaffery writes that the "reader enters the text as an under-determined code," a text "composed almost entirely of isolated non-integrating lexemes" from which "a number of readings can be built." The author/reader hierarchy has not been suspended since these "non-integrating lexemes," however segregated, constitute an authorized limit on producible readings. This limit is potentially more open than Antin's talk pieces, which retain the solemn silence of the audience. But what if the audience wants to be silent; the reader, a consumer? That this piece disallows that option, closes
it off, suggests once again Antin's remarks concerning fascist discourse. McCaffery himself will soon face the ineluctable logic of this procedure.

Still discussing the DiPalma piece, McCaffery offers one possible avenue into the poem:

A productional play can start on the associational concatenation of all references to liquid ("wet," "plunges," "shallows," "trickle," "fluency," "plankton," "sea's" comprise nearly a quarter of the entire poem). This "aquatic" code might then be employed as a contextual dominant to determine the vectors of meaning in the poem's total textual content.¹⁷

Since meaning remains the telos toward which this textuality is directed, there is still a signified function retained. Since "meaning" is never in the text itself but is always another text (as paraphrase), why is the signified, though "beyond the words themselves," privileged over and above the referent? McCaffery does not tell us. One reason might be that as the meaning can only appear as a text, language remains privileged over "objects" beyond the text. Another reason might have to do with control. The reader can dictate whatever "signified" she wishes whereas the referent resides beyond her control. This suggests the possibility of a number of signifieds per referent. But if there can be many signifieds for a referent, there can be many ideas of what the referent is: we could never say the referent "itself" as though it were a stable ontological thing. Thus even conventional reading habits are concerned ultimately with signifieds. The idea of the referent may simply be a concept within the metaphysics of philosophical idealism.

In fact, McCaffery sees this process of signification as empowering for reader and author: "The cipher thus offers a strategic method for motivating non-commodital productivities that cast both writer and reader into an identical work process."¹⁸ But how can this be? We've just been told the reader produces signifieds by channeling "non-integrating lexemes" through a series of possibly "meaningful" sequences; the author
does not do this. He provides the lexemes. The reader produces her artifact of meaning. This creates the boss/work structure. There's work and then there's work.

But let's get down to some basic questions. Does McCaffery really get stimulated by something like "Codicil?" He is not a "reader"; he's a Canadian poet and critic. The prose of his reading illustrates that he is nothing like the "reader" (does he mean non-poets, non-critics?). Now, as I wrote above, language writers are concerned with other writers as audiences, so we can assume that McCaffery's reader is probably a critic and/or writer (as is my "we"). Given this I ask again: why should the reader produce a text in this manner when she can produce a text in the old conventional way? Moreover, since most critics, poets, and other writers read critically anyway—that is, read in a writerly, productive fashion—then isn't all this polemicizing a waste of time?

McCaffery realizes that language writing poses political and cultural problems despite the various intentions of its proponents. For example, there is no essential difference in either intention or effect between the subliminal advertising methods of commodity industries and what McCaffery calls Clark Coolidge's "connotational motivation to a phonemic list and the sublexemic elements necessary for a semantic re-appropriation." McCaffery understands language writing's link to what it supposedly criticizes from an "outside" or "beyond" so that, by a kind of perverse irony, pulp fiction turns out to be potentially more than "serious" literature, revolutionary precisely because of its commodital status. It is the old Trojan Horse maneuver:

The reader of Mickey Spillane or Arthur Hailey is not foreclosed or overdetermined as a structural element of a particular kind of fiction. (We will see in a short while how popular fiction permits a wide range of subversive or distortional codes). By contrast, Language Writing proposes not only the unbinding of signs and referents and the polysemous development of the signifier, but also a closed Model Reader predetermined by the productional disposition he is compelled to adapt. She is constituted upon a series of prohibitions (you can't
consume, you can't reproduce an identical message, you can't subvert a representation). Hence the emancipatory character of the reading becomes a mandatory liberation. . . . It is precisely their resistance to aberrant decodings that imposes a devastating qualification on the emancipatory scope of Language texts.

Or as Umberto Eco put it, the open text is closed to the reader while the closed text is open. For Eco (cf. Chapter 2), the open text wants to say everything so it leaves the reader with nothing to say. Conversely, the closed text has one thing to say so the reader can say a number of other things about it. The implications of McCaffery's critique are far-reaching. It might, for example, account for the proliferation of women studies programs in academia while the resistance to hiring feminists in traditional departments remains formidable. By placing women in women's studies, academia hopes to control the effectiveness of feminism in the university. Women's studies programs, centers, resources, etc., become the frames in which feminism may be quarantined.

Conversely, hiring feminists within academic departments presents a threat to the university since the feminist critique reaches a greater number of students (that's the function of making women's studies courses "electives") and, moreover, undermines the epistemological foundations of the department (English, History, Physical Science, Chemistry, etc.). In fact, what often happens is that women centers "smear" the lines that have been drawn around them (financial, political, etc.) and infiltrate--ideologically, politically, etc.--the rest of the university community. Feminists have discovered that they are most effective working both sides of the frame: within traditional departments and within women center programs. One thinks of Derrida's notion of a double writing: writing with both hands (within and at the limit of metaphysics). One thinks of the false dilemma blacks in this country ponder when confronted with the philosophies of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King: the false belief that between these two one must choose.
Perhaps the major error the language writers have made is a facile analogy between consumption as a concept in political economy and consumption as a factor in aesthetics. Or perhaps the relationship between production and consumption demands rethinking. Both author and reader can be conceived as both producers and consumers even under conventional reading habits. Critical reading is both production and consumption, and since those who read poetry are, for the most part, critical readers, the language project may be superfluous. Furthermore, given the overwrought prose of McCaffery's prose, I want to emphasize the positive qualities of consumption. The process of rising to "consciousness" from under the sedimentation of ideology, to use a Marxist example, depends on a vast and critical consumption of capitalist commodities, material and ideal (books, values, theories, journals, etc.). In fact, it is the lack of consumption of critical materials that condemn consumers to the consumption of uncritical materials (advertisements, fashions, trends, and their commodities). There are critical commodities (films, newspapers, books, essays, etc.) and uncritical commodities (these too are films, newspapers, books, essays, etc.). Language writing flirts with a metaphysics of materialism: what must be negotiated is the uncritical consumption of commonplaces and the reification of the signifier.21

I do not intend to offer a complete reading of Barrett Watten's texts. Such an endeavor is impossible by definition; language writing drives that point home. Insofar as his writings practice a form, or forms, of language writing, one is never finished with a text no matter how brief its length or how extensive the commentary. But by the same token, it may be that the brief remarks I make below extend beyond the specific critical and creative writings cited to include a great deal of Watten's work. The tendency to repetition, the concern with a constellation of ideas, and thus the overdetermination of formal and thematic concerns is as much a fact of language writing as any other kind. For Barrett Watten, these tendencies are treated under the general category of form. 1
shall discuss Watten's treatment of this concept in his collection of essays, *Total Syntax*, and then attempt to "produce" the first few lines from his book-length poem *Progress* and "Plasma."22

For Watten, the significance of the break language writing makes from mainstream neoromanticism is a function of its revision of the modernist apotheosis of form. Rather than just an effect or cause of language in general, form in language also characterizes "conceptual order in individuals"; consequently, form is the site par excellence for "the possibilities of change." Not only, then, is language writing irreducible to language per se--and this maintenance of that difference sets Watten apart from many of the other language writers--but because it is a matter of form, the question of change (political, social, cultural, etc.) is bound up with the question of reading habits.23 For Watten, form is the index of possible change in the reader, which is why this change must always be motivated from outside, i.e., by the coercion of texts that demand new reading formats: "In editing *This* my criterion of interest has been, in general, that a given work comes to an identity with its particular technique. How it comes into being is the same as what it is."24 The process is the product; thus far nothing that I have said regarding Watten makes him anything more than a neomodernist. Watten goes on to outline his conception of the writing process. It has three stages, and the second stage serves as the nexus between the first and third stages:

One could say that technique is the principle of construction in the writing. In other words, how the writing is written, prior to the finished work. Method is the principle of construction that begins with the finished work, with the activity of the writer as a whole, the extension of the act of writing into the world and eventually into historical self-consciousness. Style might be the middle term.25

If style is the linguistic construct of a self in the text,26 then despite Watten's "personal
grip against the self," it would appear that it is only the self as "total limit" that he wishes to transgress. That is, it is the self as the origin of technique and method that he revises; technique precedes and method succeeds the self inasmuch as the self is subject to the present effects of a historical past that determines technique and the future effects of a historical future that determines method.

Yet Watten is aware of the limitations of any attack on this "total limit" of the self that aims at disrupting conventional syntax:

One of the problems with the attack on normative grammar, which would break it down into bits and pieces of verbal rubble that then might release libidinal flux, is that it demands a prior value, 'a whole person in a whole world.' And since that is not possible, we have to keep going, back to the original impossible act. Hence Watten's refusal to work at the submorphemic level. He writes at the phrase and sentence levels and employs a variety of surrealist techniques to disrupt semantic—not syntactic—linearity (signifier + signified = referent). It is also possible to read this statement as a critique of the concept of ideology as a veil for a truth: "a whole person in a whole world." But this also makes ideology ineffective as a concept synonymous with "reality" when the latter is conceived under the banner of the natural.

I believe that this is the value of a reader-based hermeneutics to which the notorious hermeticism of language writing is related. The spiral of interpretation can be endless because there is no truth residing in intention at which to arrive:

For poetry, the fact of style in language, without forgetting values brought into the poem from its literary past, can be the point of departure into the poem as ideology. Poetry extends itself by its own means, in the act of writing, in public readings, and as a published text in the political context. Style is the point of departure into the poem as ideology because style is the configuration of the self as social construct. Thus the self is, in a certain sense, ideology. By extension, then, the book is performe a commodity:
As a commodity the book represents social conventions from which it is not possible to escape; it is possible, though, to speak of the agency of style without regard to commodity status. Rather than being a determinant, the market is bypassed by what is of most interest in a poem.

This "agency of style" that, as commodity, is a surplus in the market appears to be aestheticism, the aesthetic of the self as a specific style (form) in the poem. Traditionally, the aesthetic self as form or style is surplus because although it can be reproduced it has no use-value in the market. For Watten, it seems that the "agency of style" is the aesthetic self that arises as an effect of technique and method. The similarities of this process to the Hegelian dialectic (thesis + antithesis=synthesis) are perhaps not inconsequential. On the other hand, the differences are also important. Technique and method are not opposites in conflict. Thus there is no transcendence--no Aufhebung--involved in Watten's value of style. However, due to Watten's political agenda, this effect, like Hegel's, is still viewed as a necessity. It thus has the force of a metaphysical foreclosure of reading and writing. Thus the question of overall form--technique, style and method--takes on paramount importance because it is at this level that the reader produces and/or consumes the text.

But if Watten here seems to neutralize the charge of aestheticism because he transforms his value of form into an ethos of writing and reading, his valorization of "explanation" as a guarantee of authenticity and sincerity reinscribes formalist dependency on intention and certainty. Explanation is a function of the writer's method, the way he demystifies the work of art by explicitly "interpreting" his own work. That's fine, and indeed, interesting, but how does this square with the reader's productivity? The point seems to be that the writer is as much a reader as the reader is a writer; the writers simply explains how and what he attempted to do. His explanation should not be a constraint on the other readers' interpretations. Yes, explanation extends the work into the world and provides tools for opening up the work to befuddled and limited
readers. But on the other hand, it constrains the adventure of the reader's production of the text simply because it does give him tools and, perhaps, negates the search for or creation of other tools. McCaffery has already shown us how mandating production is not liberation. If the parameters of production are also mandated, the limits on what can be produced have narrowed. In short, the value of explanation does not help overcome the writer/reader difference, and because this value, like that of production, is mandatory, the writer/reader difference erects itself into a hierarchy: you will produce, here are the tools, etc.

Moreover, it becomes clear that Watten's valorization of form does not always maintain its ethical stance, the one thing that prevents it from simply being a protomodernist tool for control of the reader. Near the end of *Total Syntax*, Watten criticizes Dan Graham's conceptual poem because it "gives only external parameters such as number of words, number of prepositions, nouns, and so on."32 Watten insists that the question of "Whether something like a poem could be generated at all, even in a manner interior to language, is another question altogether, but in any case a poem is a construction in language."33 Graham's piece supports my charge that inasmuch as the materials of the poem still belong to the author, the boss/worker relationship prevails, and that, in fact, this mandatory production turns what had been a choice of readings (uncritical consumption, critical consumption or production) into a Stalinist factory. Graham's piece is playful, a game between writer and reader, yet Watten calls it a "monstrous mistake." If we recall, poetry is process for writers as diverse as Coolidge, Watten, Antin, etc. Watten says that "Poems are temporal; they have no object status."34 They are temporal because they are made in language, which is also temporal. Graham's poem involves no temporal movement until the reader produces a reading. But it still does not elude the writer/reader difference and it is still coercive. Watten maintains the writer/reader difference on the implied basis of a temporal/spatial distinction that we have already seen is hopelessly muddled. And it is for this reason that Watten's critical
work is both prescriptive and liberating; it opens and closes itself in the same moment to its readers.

Perhaps what needs reevaluation is the whole notion of the writer/reader difference as hierarchical or analogous to the producer/consumer distinction. No doubt it is in Hegel's long shadows that these differences appear as analogues of the master/slave relationship. Rather than shadows attempting to blur this difference or reverse it, we need to maintain the difference as it appears--even as a hierarchy--and reconceptualize the values of production as necessarily "good" and consumption as necessarily "bad."

Perhaps we need to rethink the concept of analogy that permits the uncritical transfer of concepts across fields of study: political economy, literature, philosophy, mathematics, physics, etc.

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What follows is a sketchy illustration of what it might mean to produce a portion of a Watten poem. These are the first three sentences of his poem "Plasma":

A paradox is eaten by the space around it.

I'll repeat what I said.

To make a city into a season is to wear sunglasses inside a volcano.35

These sentences are triple-spaced by Watten to emphasize their relative autonomy. I want to show how they can be read individually and collectively, i.e., as a "narrative."

One characteristic of the first sentence is its homonymic pun that serves to reinforce the grammatical sense of the poem: a pair of dots is substituted by the pronoun "it" even though a pair refers to a plurality. It's one of the contradictions in our language that we accept as grammatically valid: hence the syntactic form of the sentence is a paradox. At the semantic level, a paradox is the simultaneous validation of two equally valid assertions that are nonetheless mutually exclusive. This simultaneous validation occurs elsewhere, outside language, as the "meaning" of paradox. This "meaning" is necessarily
(meaning is metaphysical) outside language because once the meaning is put back into language there are two valid assertions next to one another: for example, "I am black all over. I am white all over." But this no longer a paradox itself because the sentences have been spatialized and temporalized: they are a "pair of dots" that no longer occupy the same space at the same time: impossible in physics, language, etc. But possible in the atemporal non-spatial instant of "meaning." Thus the materiality of language puts the lie to the ideality of meaning. Thus the paradox is consumed by spatiality: the "white" of the blank page devours the meaning of paradox.

Sentence two is a declaration of deferral, that is, a promise. The future will validate the past. But at the moment of the declarative the future and past are equally present at the site of the "what." This "what" is the sentence as it stands. But this "what" is not a stable entity, for sentences like this one (this "what") are made up of embedded sentences: this declarative is made of one imperative ("repeat what I said") and four declaratives ("I said," "I'll," "I'll repeat," and "I'll repeat what"). In relationship to the first statement this sentence serves as a link to the third sentence which is a variation on the first. Moreover, "what" also refers to the first sentence.

Sentence three is only a "repeat" of sentence one at the level of analogy. You can't "make a city into a season" if the values of "city" and "season," which depend on the prior metaphysical opposition of culture and nature, still hold. But you can "wear sunglasses inside a volcano." And yet what is possible is ludicrous; what is impossible cannot even be called "reasonable," "silly" or anything. This, of course, from the perspective of metaphysics. Now grammatical symmetry (two infinitive phrases linked by the copula "is") is replicated at the metaphysical level where culture and nature are opposed: to make a culture into a nature is to wear culture inside nature. There is no escape from culture, and one cannot shed one's culture even when one believes one is in nature. Now as the first part of the sentence is composed of logical concepts ("city" and "season") while the second part is composed of physical concepts ("sunglasses" and "volcano"), to
make one logical concept into another is to wear one physical concept inside another. You can't see, you confuse differences. And of course paradox is the name of this confusion when it is validated. To disentangle things, to return to the differences "themselves," one must return to the materiality of language without jettisoning its ideality. Rather, one must, as Watten does here, de-center language's ideality.

To return to differences and not the identifies of things, Watten, in Progress, reverses Williams' famous dictum. For Watten, "The idea / is the thing." There are no things but ideas, a notion suppressed by the value of intentionality that directs the sign to something other than itself. The sign is impoverished to the degree its use-value is confined to its signifying function. In classical logic the notion of the idea as thing is contradictory because of the prior intelligible-sensible distinction. Watten plays out this metaphysical scenario from the outset: "Relax / stand at attention, and." Not only is there a paradoxical relationship between the first two clauses, but there is also paradox embedded in the first word of the poem: "Relax" commands ease. This suggests that Watten, like McCaffery, is quite aware of the contradictions of mandated liberation by language writing. But this statement is not only a caveat for language writers. It also points to the notion that we take the ease of our conventional reading habits as a choice we have made, not understanding that this "ease" is also mandated by a number of social, historical, political, etc., interests. We forget the significance of the word "habit"; were reading in general forbidden by a totalitarian government we might remember.

Now the imperative of "Relax" is reiterated by the clause that follows: "stand at attention." The grammatical form of "Relax," which contradicts its meaning, is resolved here; "stand at attention" defines "Relax." The second clause is followed by a third, which ends the second line: "and." The sequence of three clauses suggests that "and" is related to "Relax" and "stand at attention." This "and," which suggests movement, is followed by a period. Move only so far. This value of limited movement encompasses the structure of "Relax / stand at attention." Relax this much and then stand at attention.
Moreover, this "and" represents the dislocated link between being commanded to relax and commanded to stand at attention. As it is, the form "Relax / stand at attention" is a paradox: two mutually exclusive commandments.

The lines I cited above--"The idea / is the thing"--are preceded by these lines:
"Purple snake stands out on / Porcelain tiles." The key phrase here is "stands out on." The figure seems to stand out from its (literal) ground; the ground seems to recede to the background in order to let the figure be as figure. But without this ground the figure could not be because (1) the figure would have nothing to differ from in order to become a figure, and (2) the figure is on the ground. It stands out from the ground it is on. But then, what does it mean to claim that "The idea / is the thing?" Watten is first contesting the intelligible-sensible distinction that Williams relied on when he said "No ideas but in things." But this does not mean that the idea as thing is the same as snakes as things. The idea of the snake (concept) is a thing, but it relates to the snake as thing (referent) as a figure to a ground. To confuse these two things is to fall into ideology.

Such is the bulk of the first stanza of Progress. I reproduce this stanza in its entirety--

Relax,

stand at attention, and.

Purple snake stands out on

Porcelain tile. The idea

Is the thing. Skewed by design . . .

--and leave the analysis of the alliterative, assonant, etc., components for
NOTES

1 Language Writing is the rubric under which a wide range of writing procedures have been gathered. That some of these procedures are in conflict with others is not an automatic reason for getting rid of the name. Despite the controversy generated by the label, I use it throughout and with some justice: all the writers discussed by me are concerned with the medium of language first and foremost. It is the priority of the medium in their theories and works that have led to them being dubbed proto-modernist. The phrase, though perfectly neutral and accurate, is usually used insulting. That is not the case here.


3 LB x.


5 Coolidge 5.

6 Theodore Enslin, TP 212.

7 Nathaniel Tarn, TP, 212.

8 Tarn 223.

9 Tarn 223.


12 Robert Gluck, WT, 3.


14 McCaffery 17.

15 McCaffery 18.

16 McCaffery 18.

17 McCaffery 19.

18 McCaffery 19-20.
At the end of the section of Barrett Watten I propose a rethinking of production as a positive category. McCaffery hints at the same in an interview conducted by Andrew Payne in the same collection: "In light of the Baudrillarian 'proof' that use value is but a concealed species of exchange value I would say now that the gestural 'offer' to a reader to 'semantically produce' hints at an ideological contamination." Andrew Payne, "Nothing is Forgotten but the Talk of How to Talk," North of Intention, 124. And finally, in a long footnote to his essay "And Who Remembers Bobby Sands" McCaffery acknowledges the "media narrative" achievement of what the avant-garde has consistently failed to do: "the structural abolition of ideological relation, the avoidance of the fetish of value and the disappearance of speaker-listener as structurally determined, ideologically alienated terms." (footnote 1, 41) For a recent example, I cite the advent of rap music. A long essay detailing this form--the most original form of American music since jazz though its roots are African and Carribean--remains to be written.


Or, as Norman Finkelstein calls style in his article on Michael Palmer, "gestures." In Finkelstein's fascinating comparisons of Palmer's strategies in language to cabalistic attitudes toward Scripture, the withdrawal of the self from the text demands that the writer throw himself down before the altar of the Word or, disdaining servitude, reinscribe the self into the text as "gestures." The set of gestures which become more and more predictable constitute the self the poet thinks he has elided from his discourse. Norman Finkelstein, "The Case of Michael Palmer," Contemporary Literature 29.4 (1988), 518-37. See especially 530-31.
34 Watten, *Total Syntax*, 217.


36 Watten, *Progress*, 1.
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ABSTRACT

THE POETICS OF OPEN AND CLOSED FORMS

by

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MAY 1992

Advisor: Charles Baxter
Major: English
Degree: Doctor of Philosophy

This dissertation is an investigation into the "origins" and developments of the concepts of open and closed forms in American poetics and poetry. After a brief overview of the form these concepts take in the poetics of Walt Whitman and William Wordsworth, I trace the development of these concepts through the critical work of Charles Olson, Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, Joseph Frank and William Spanos. My argument is twofold: (1) that the concepts of open and closed forms are predicated on philosophical notions concerning form, image, space and time, and (2) these concepts are all interrelated, i.e., open forms are closed in certain ways and closed forms are open in certain ways. I close the dissertation with readings that show how the open forms of David Antin's talk poems and Barrett Watten's language poetry are closed in specific ways.
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Tyrone Williams was born and raised near the heart of the 1967 Detroit riot. He attended and survived Central High School and is currently hopping through the last hoop for his Ph. D. in English from Wayne State University. His dissertation concerns the dialogue between open and closed form in twentieth century American poetry and discusses theoreticians as diverse as Williams V. Spanos and Barrett Watten.

Mr. Williams has been a member of a variety of leftwing political organizations, experiences which have left indelible impressions on his writing and thinking. He is currently teaching at Xavier University in Cincinnati Ohio.

He has a chapbook CONVALESCENCE (Ridgeway Press, 1987), in its second printing and is working on a new manuscript for Post-Aesthetic Press entitled THE ADVENTURES OF PI. He has published poetry in or has poems forthcoming in CONDITIONED RESPONSE, ARETE, HOWLING DOG, 5 A.M., ATTICUS REVIEW, ARTFUL DODGE, WAYNE REVIEW, CORRIDORS, SIDESHOW AND RENEGADE.